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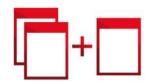
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Be Excellent To Each Other

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Many people, including myself, use games to escape the challenges of life, relax, and have a good time. So when the same hot-button political issues that dominate the 24-hours news cycle and social media bleed into my games, it takes away a sanctuary that is an important part of my sanity.

Chat logs and lobbies have always had an unsavory element to them, but lately the level of hate has risen even higher than the normal din we find online. I've seen more threats, name-calling, sexist rhetoric, and inflammatory language than ever before – and I have seen a lot. The world is such a politically charged environment right now, and people are bringing this anger and discontent to their games and saying things I simply can't repeat.

No matter what your stance is politically, our differences in opinion don't give us a right to tread on others. People believe they can get away with insulting others because they are hidden safely behind the walls of a username. This is one of the worst consequences of the anonymity provided by games and the internet. I liked trolls when they only lived in entertainment, and not on message boards or in chat lobbies.

The thing is, your political differences aren't going to be worked out in a game lobby. They can only be addressed through thoughtful discussion where both sides actually listen to each other, try to understand the opposing viewpoints, and find common ground. The unprovoked or retaliatory insults don't help. Sadly, we don't all value each other the same, and I simply don't understand why. I often think of when Rodney King asked the world, "Can we all get along?"

We have a lot of work to do if we want to re-establish a respectful political discourse. Let's start by building online communities that celebrate a shared common interest and love of games rather than dumping the world's problems into our entertainment.
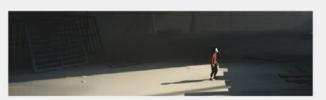
Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

P.S. We have another double cover this month, this one featuring the handsome or lovely Prey hero, Morgan Yu.

0117

46 Prey

Morgan Yu wakes up on the Talos I space station outnumbered and woefully unprepared. Will you choose to even the odds by turning the aliens' abilities against them – even if it means compromising your humanity? We visited Arkane Studios to learn how your choices matter in its new sci-fi game. *by Jeff Cork*

10 The Year Of The Shooter
2016 was a huge year for shooters. We look at how all the games stack up, and why they all hit at once.

18 Telling Stories Without Words
How do you tell an interactive story without using any words? We explore the prevalent phenomenon in the world of games.
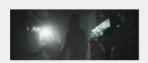
26 Role Players
We chatted with creators of Critical Role, the D&D show starring video game voice actors, among others.

36 Interview: Ed Boon
Mortal Kombat's creator, Ed Boon, walked us through his long history in the industry.

42 NES Classic Edition Review
We spent time with Nintendo's throwback console and are ready to deliver our thoughts.

60 Resident Evil 7 Biohazard
Resident Evil 7 has been mysterious since its announcement, but hopefully our preview answers some questions.

82 Dishonored 2
We have our review of the father/daughter assassin simulator.

84 Watch Dogs 2
Watch Dogs was a commercial success, but critically mixed, so we're curious to find out about the sequel.

Correction: In our Mass Effect Andromeda cover story in issue 284, we incorrectly listed the female protagonist's name as "Sarah Ryder." It is spelled "Sara Ryder." We apologize for the error.

games index

We asked readers for their Destiny 2 wishes, and they didn't disappoint. The Last Guardian also got lots of love this month, while our controller ranking got lots of hate. Can't win 'em all.

At Long Last

I just read your preview of The Last Guardian (A Beautiful Struggle, issue 283), and I must say that as an Xbox One player, this might be the game that makes me buy a PS4. I watched PewDiePie play it on his channel and it looks amazing; the preview from your demo brings more context to the playthrough, and makes me even more jealous of PS4 players getting such an awesome-looking game. I hope to see a more in-depth review of the full game soon – hopefully this year!

**Theresa Benedict
via email**

I just read your preview of The Last Guardian, and after watching a play-through of the demo, I agree with most of the points in your article. But the one thing I disagree with is improving the controls of the character. Don't get me wrong; I believe controls are one of the most important parts of any game, but that's why I disagree. As you can tell, the kid you play as in The Last Guardian is no Lara Croft, and having janky controls can add to the feeling of being a small, awkward child. I want to know if you believe this was a conscious choice by Mr. Ueda, or if it will get ironed out before release.

**Alex G.
New Jersey**

We don't know that any developer would make their controls "janky" on purpose, but seeing as the largest frustration during our demo came from positioning the camera, we doubt it was done intentionally. However, The Last Guardian's controls are still improved over Ico and Shadow of the Colossus, and our early impressions left us with the same sense of excitement and intrigue. So far, all signs point to The Last Guardian being worth the wait.

A Mixed Metaphor

I really enjoyed the "Where Sonic Went Wrong" article in issue 283. It seemed to cover all the major points, and I felt genuinely bad for Takashi Iizuka and his team given what they went through. However, the final quote from Sega of America's former CEO makes me worry that the people in charge still just don't get it. Comparing Sonic's cyclical popularity to properties like Marvel, Barbie, and Hot Wheels feels like somebody's missing the point.

**Daniel Fox
via email**

While Sonic certainly has its share of comic books and toys, the games are what matter most (and what are most in need of fixing). Iizuka and his team seem to understand that, and Sega's embrace of the indie-developed Sonic Mania has been promising. We don't know how Sonic Team's next project will turn out, and we won't blame anyone for remaining skeptical; the Blue Blur still has a lot to prove.

Still Burning

In issue 283, you had a small "Burning Questions" blurb asking about the repercussions if you don't give Call of Duty a high review score. But to be serious about that, what would happen? Ghosts and Advanced Warfare were both not great games and are known as the worst Call of Duty games in recent years. But they still got an eight and nine respectively, which are the average scores every Call of Duty gets. That logic begs the question: Are you guys actually giving an honest review, or are you just trying to please one side over the other?

Matthew Snell
via email

Here's the thing, Matt: Everyone wants something different out of Call of Duty. For many longtime fans, that means a return to Modern Warfare's setting and sensibilities, and the more the franchise changes, the more vocal they are with their displeasure. But different doesn't equal bad. We at GI don't review games based on nostalgia, brand recognition, or what we think a game "should" be. We review games based on what they are, and our opinions won't be swayed by an angry publisher or a legion of cynical fans. The fact that Call of Duty games consistently receive high scores is a testament to their robust offerings and the talent and hard work of their developers, nothing more.

Out Of Control

Your article ranking all of the first-party controllers (Classic G.I., issue 283) was a fun read, especially considering I've used all the controllers on the list except the Sega Master controller and the original Xbox Duke controller. I must say that as much I love how low the Atari Jaguar controller was on the list, I personally feel it should've been even lower, maybe even at number 25. The 12 buttons in the center are useless, above and beyond the fact that any controller with over 20 buttons on it is just ridiculous.

Matthew Laramore
via email

Are you out of your mind? It's obvious Kyle doesn't like any consoles that came out before he learned not to crap in his pants. But to dismiss them wholesale is to not understand them. The Intellivision controller was a mind/body melding experience that is just not achieved with today's consoles. You want the shortstop in Intellivison Baseball to go after the ball? All you need to do is think it and your hand knew how to move the disc to make him go right where he needs to go, like a video game Oujia board. The key thing that classic controllers had was moddability. That's right, we modded those earlier controllers. For example, the Atari 2600 joystick rests on four leaf springs – a simple addition of an oscillator circuit with a potentiometer made your Track and Field runners take off like rockets. To brush these classic controllers off in a sidebar as "mostly terrible" is a great disservice.

William Eisenhauer
via email

To be fair, Kyle was crapping his pants well into the NES era, and the system's boxy controller still landed at number 14. However, arguing for hours over the list proved that what makes a controller "good" is even more subjective than a game. Even though we voted on the order, Kyle got as many complaints from his fellow editors as he did readers. Now that's democracy in action!

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month the team leads at Arkane Studios invited us to their offices in Austin, Texas to check out Prey. Learn all about it on page 46.
(Right) Game Informer's 25-hour Extra Life marathon got a little messy thanks to some big donors who paid to see Joe and Javy take pies to the face. Anything for the kids!

- ■ Destiny 2 Wish Lists
- ■ Controller Ranking Gripes
- ■ Gears 4 Fans
- ■ Last Guardian Love
- ■ Bring Back Cheat Codes!

Choose Your Destiny

In issue 283, we asked readers what the number-one feature they want to see in Destiny 2 is. Surprisingly, few haters wrote in with snarky replies. Unsurprisingly, dedicated servers were the most-requested feature. Here are some of the responses.

The number one thing I want to see "in" Destiny 2 wouldn't even be in the game: dedicated servers. It would make all game modes across PvP and PvE that much better. Aside from that, in-game Grimoire Cards would be amazing. Maybe then we could all be as knowledgeable as Matt Miller!

Nicholas Lai

Destiny 2 needs way more content! If Destiny 2 has 10 raids, over 20 strikes, and a more in-depth story that I can't get through in four hours, I'll gladly pay Bungie $80 for the game. Why is it so hard to beat the amount of content The Witcher 3 had with all the money Destiny makes? And yes, I said 10 Raids.

Keitarious Williams

The thing I want to see most in Destiny 2 would definitely be better vehicles. The ships need to be usable (i.e, dogfights), and they need to add more options, like Warthog-style ground vehicles. I'd also like to see player data from Destiny carry over to the sequel.

Brayden Valentine

Death Defying Odds?

I've been a reader of your magazine for 12 years now, just as long as I have been a gamer on Xbox. Here's my question: I know THQ has gone out of business. What I want to know is, are any other companies going to pick up the Darksiders series? War and Death had great games. Will Fury and Pestilence ever get their own games as well? Thank you for your time and consideration, and keep doing a wonderful job.

Percy McPeters
via email

Darksiders fans shouldn't give up hope yet. After THQ's demise, Nordic Games bought the rights to the series and subsequently renamed itself THQ Nordic. Since then, the publisher hired former Darksiders developers at Gunfire Games to make a current-gen remaster of Darksiders 2, which THQ Nordic called "just the start" of its plans for the series. A current-gen remaster of the original Darksiders should also be available by the time you read this. None of that adds up to a Darksiders 3 just yet, but it's safe to say the series is far from dead.

(Left) Here's Kyle preparing for his own Extra Life embarrassment: reenacting *The Fifth Element's* space opera scene. After he blue himself. Watch the archive at gameinformer.com.
(Right) Motion City Sountrack's Justin Pierre recently stopped by to participate in a music-based episode of Replay. Check it out at gameinformer.com/replay.
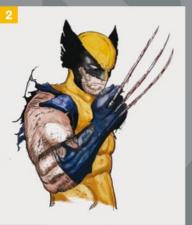
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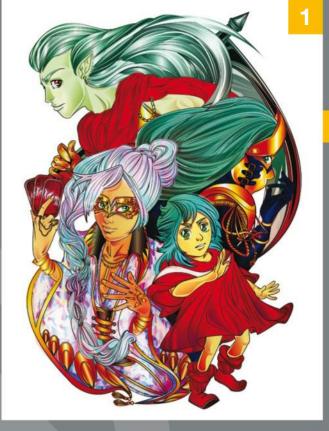
WINNER

1 Corinne Butcher
A stunning piece inspired by the wildly underappreciated Chrono Cross

2 James Rafael
When you have guns like Wolverine, you better tear your shirt to show them off

3 Kelly Tobler
Another young artist with a promising career in games

4 Santina Bonilla
This piece is titled "King Sonic." We'd like to see this version of the character in a game

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(Left) During this year's Blizzcon, Dan Tack caught up with Curse director of communications Blake Shuster, and a maestro of the Game Informer community, Chris Kochon.
(Right) Tack also met with Blizzard president and co-founder Mike Morhaime.

connect

OVERWATCH

GEARS OF WAR 4

TITANFALL 2

BATTLEFIELD 1

CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE

HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION

DOOM

SHADOW WARRIOR 2

BATTLEBORN

NOTABLES

THE YEAR OF THE SHOOTER

HOW THE GENRE CAME TO RULE 2016

by Javy Gwaltney

For many, 2016 will be remembered as a year filled with turmoil, worldwide anxiety, and grief over the deaths of talented artists. However, in the world of video games, perhaps what would best epitomize this year is the number of quality shooters that have emerged in that short span of time. It's rare to have a year where this particular genre has this strong of a foothold, the last being 2004, which saw the release of Half-life 2, Halo 2, and Far Cry among other quality first-person shooters.

This year's releases ran the gamut from colorful, accessible multiplayer-only experiences to grim, story-driven experiences taking place on the blood-soaked battlegrounds of The Great War.

Here we examine the genre's presence during this year, its successes as well as its failures, and where it can go from here.

Titanfall 2

OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Though the majority of 2016's shooters had strong multiplayer experiences, one of the more interesting trends to witness was EA's franchises stepping back from the multiplayer-focused agenda of previous years. The last three Battlefield games received criticism from critics and players alike for their tacked-on single-player experiences, while the original Titanfall and 2015's Star Wars Battlefront lacked compelling single-player modes.

This year marked a reversal of that trend. Not only was Battlefield 1's campaign a satisfying, singular experience, it also ended up being one of the most enjoyable campaigns of the year thanks to its vignette structure that allowed players to experience the stories of soldiers around the world during the first World War. "Initially, we were looking into the more standard campaign format but something wasn't sitting right with us in terms of how to execute the game," says DICE single-player producer Jaime Keen. "We wanted to treat the subject matter with respect, and have a game that felt like it was doing the right job in speaking to how World War I was and how it speaks to people today."
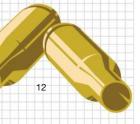
According to Keen, key members of

DICE sat down to revise the structure and ultimately decided to tell a series of short stories connected by the theme of the war. "So we ended up exploring some ideas of having an adventure game of sorts," he says. Eventually [we] came up with this idea of these vignettes, and I think the prompt for it was the scale of this war. You didn't have people who went all over the place, so it made sense to tell these individual stories to give a sense at how big the war was and how many people it touched."
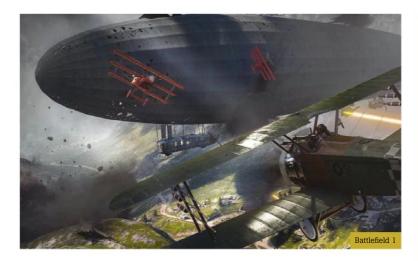
EA's other big fall release, Titanfall 2, sought to satisfy players unhappy with the original by implementing a single-player campaign. "We wanted a 'gameplay first' mindset [for the campaign]," says single-player campaign director Steve Fukuda. "The first question was, 'Should we do a single-player campaign' and looking back we definitely had the DNA of it, and it made a lot of sense to do it just on the basis of our talent."

As a blend of *Rambo*, *Star Wars*, and *Gundam*, Titanfall 2's seven-hour campaign was a critical success, with praise heaped upon its variety, puzzles, shooting, and humor. Fukuda attributes the success of the campaign to the fact that what the team built

focused expliticly on varied game-play before worrying about the story: "We arrived at this shorthand formula called 2-1-1, which meant two parts combat, one part platforming, one part puzzling," he says. "'More Than Just Shooting' was our mini-slogan during development. For a long time all we really had was that this was the game about a pilot and a Titan, but we didn't know who that pilot was or who that Titan was, but that was worked out over the course of the project."

Id Software's Doom also took a step back into the past in more ways than one, creating a 12-hour campaign that had little patience for serious storytelling and instead focused on making the player the star of their own bloodthirsty ballet on Mars. The arcadey action and over-the-top violence marks a departure from the survival-horror trappings of Doom 3 by skillfully channeling and polishing the simple elements that made the first game a revolution: speed, gore, guns, and monsters. The multiplayer component's attempts to bring back the frantic, rocket-launcher powered combat of Quake wasn't as successful, but still an admirable effort to Doom's grand attempt to capture the gory glory of its past.

Battlefield 1

Gears of War 4

THE PROVING GROUNDS

Along with shooters reclaiming the glory of single-player campaigns, a few franchises took creative risks to renew themselves and capture the interest of their audience once again. The Coalition, a studio formed by Microsoft for the explicit purpose of developing Gears of Wars titles, faced a *Force Awakens*-esque uphill battle, having to pay respect to the original trilogy while also setting out to create a unique story and stand alone on its own merits. "We wanted to build a baseline and show that we knew how to make a Gears game," says studio head Rod Fergusson, "and that the series is safe in The Coalition's hands so we could go forward and build upon it for the future."

Gears of War 4 scales the series back from the epic war story that played out in the original trilogy to focus on a group of people trying to survive the night in an environment filled with monsters that want to kill them, essentially trading *Saving Private Ryan* for *Evil Dead*. The grim tone from the previous games was also softened, with a focus on characters exchanging witty banter and growing close to one another in desperate times (though the brutal gameplay – which includes chopping monsters with the Lancer rifle's chainsaw – remains unchanged). Gears 4 is still Gears, but with a little more heart.

"[During development], I'd use the word 'tense,'"Fergusson explains, "because we're not a survival horror game. For us, it was more about trying to bring back tension and sweaty plams and shoulders creeping up to your ears as part of the situation, and that's really what we wanted to do with the introduction to this one." While a lot of Gears 4's success is owed to its relatively small scale, Fergusson admits that it's probably unavoidable that later games in the series will have to ratchet up the drama and size. "When we did 1, 2, and 3, it was definitely an escalation of scale. It started off as a small group of soldiers behind enemy lines and then into a war, taking-the-fighting-to-the-enemies [experience]. And our plan is to learn from that. I think for the future it's really just a matter of understanding that we're Gears of War and not Gears of Incursion, so I think you want to have a scale where it feels like you're at war but at the same time it's about not losing focus on the intimacy of the story or the characters you care about, that you're not creating a place where everything feels so understood that you're playing a World War II game."

While The Coalition still needs to prove it can iterate and expand on the new foundation in meaningful ways, the critical response to Gears of War 4 strongly suggests the series is indeed in good hands.

Infinity Ward also faced a similar struggle, though the studio that birthed Call of Duty has come at the problem from a different vantage. Infinity Ward is a developer with a lot of prestige, having created one of the most popular game franchises ever made, but it's also a studio with a troubled history. During the development of Modern Warfare 2, Activision fired co-founder Vince Zampella and president Jason West after they were unable to reach an agreement with the publisher over new contracts. The two formed their own studio, Respawn Entertainment, with many of Infinity Ward's development team talent following the duo to help work on what would become Titanfall. While Sledgehammer Games and Treyarch's Call of Duty games have been well-received in the years since the dust-up, Infinity Ward's Ghosts and Modern Warfare 3 are considered by many to be the weakest entries in the series.

A bombastic interstellar campaign gave players more tactical freedom than any Call of Duty title to come before, and both the Zombies and competitive multiplayer modes proved to be robust. Infinite Warfare, against sizable odds, has emerged as a fantastic addition to the series, though early sales reports for the title aren't exactly strong. This suggests fans and skeptics alike might already be checked out beyond the point of no return, though these sales may not be reflective of the whole picture (see Waiting for the Payload sidebar for more details).

ALL IN THE FAMILY
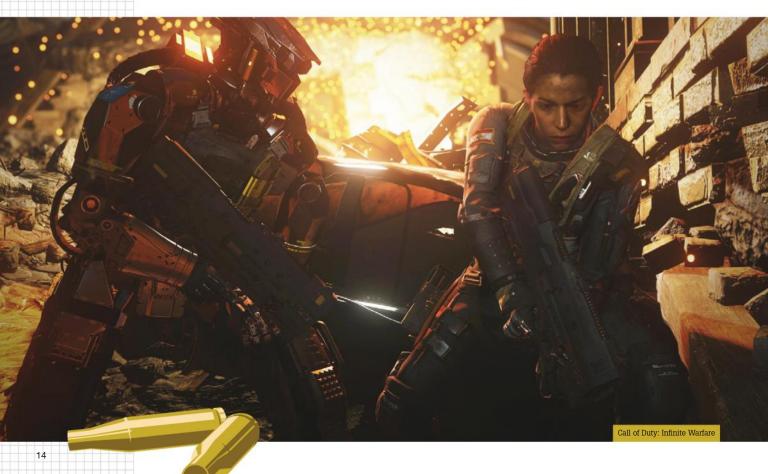
Perhaps no shooter this year sticks out in people's minds more than Blizzard Entertainment's first stab at the genre, Overwatch, a game that takes the hero roster concept from popular MOBAs like League of Legends and Dota 2 and sticks them inside a team-based multiplayer shooter. Despite launching in May, the sheer fandom surrounding the game has kept its player numbers up on both console and PC throughout the year (during an earnings call, Activision revealed that Overwatch was the fastest title to reach 20 million registered players worldwide), with people growing attached to the roster of colorful heroes as well as the deep-but-accessible gameplay.

In the months since its retail release, the game has emerged as a cultural phenomenon, branching out to a general audience as well as drowning

Waiting For The Payload

Though many of the shooters released this year have been drowning in praise, critical acclaim doesn't necessarily translate into hot sales. The UK sales reports for both Titanfall 2 and Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare are abysmal, with Infinite Warfare currently down 50 percent from Black Ops III's sales and Titanfall 2 outright being considered a flop.

However, Michael Pachter isn't convinced these numbers are the whole picture. "It's too early too tell," he says. "Since we don't get daily sales data, it seems a bit premature to write off the holiday based on some sales data from the UK. The UK is maybe 10 percent of the market, so it appears people are making a lot from a little. Titanfall 2 got pushed forward and came between Battlefield and Call of Duty, and although I think that's kind of confusing especially for the holiday season, I think by March we're going to settle in the same place we were three years ago. If you look at the sales, Battlefield did 15 million from October to March, Call of Duty: Ghosts did 20 million between its launch in November and March, and Titanfall didn't do as many in March because it pushed the Xbox 360 version to April but it did six million at least." Pachter is confident that all three franchises will recover by March 2017. "Yeah, [all three franchises] will sell at least 31 million between them – that's a lot. And I think more; I think actually they're all gonna be fine."

the internet in an endless stream of fanart and alternate reality games. Regardless of what people think about the gameplay itself, Overwatch has become something that is extremely rare in an industry that ships countless games a year: inescapable.

The success is even more astonishing because it's multiplayer-only, with no carrot-and-stick progression system outside of cosmetics. As editor Daniel Tack discussed in his review earlier this year, Overwatch's gameplay modes are simplistic, but polished and fine-tuned to near-perfection. Add that to the varied characters, all memorable with distinct abilities, as well as Blizzard's consistent and beefy content updates, and you have an unbeatable formula.

Overwatch's success has led gamers to wonder if we'll see more developers striving to make first-person shooters in its mold. Industry analyist Michael Pachter says he's not sure that the Overwatch model is all that appetizing because, "Blizzard still hasn't done what they're supposed to do, which is create microtransactions where players get something of value. The problem with lootboxes is that they're all cosmetic items only." Pachter says he believes developers will instead embrace the free DLC models associated with Halo 5 and Titanfall 2 because, "players get rewarded for playing," but people can still buy weapons and items if they don't have that much time to invest in the game.

With Overwatch-likes Paladins and Lawbreakers on the way, whether Pachter is right remains to be seen. Regardless, Blizzard's MOBA-inspired shooter reigned over a jam-packed genre, and everyone is curious to see its influence in the years to come.

LOCK AND LOAD

It's unsurprising given just how great this year was for shooters that 2017 looks…a little bare. Ghost Recon Wildlands, Quake Champions, Destiny 2, the sequel to Star Wars: Battlefront, and Sledgehammer's next Call of Duty entry are supposedly set to arrive next year, but we know precious little about most of these games. However, the sheer variety of experiences offered by shooters this year is exciting because of the lessons they may impart to both first-person and third-person shooters currently or soon to be in development, like how there is no single path to success when it comes to developing for both single-player and multiplayer or how going back might actually be the way to move forward.

We'll have to keep our eyes on the horizon for what unannounced shooters are crouching just out of view. In the meantime, there are more than enough demons on Mars in need of shotgunning and payloads to escort to keep us occupied.

Overwatch

Ghost Recon Wildlands

Two PC Indies You Should Be Watching

by Matt Miller

Confession time: It's hard to keep up with the ever-widening array of indie games vying for attention. Every day, new games are announced, others launch demos, and yet others reveal exciting new features. It's a challenge to choose the games to feature, and there's no platform where that's more true than the wild west PC indie scene. We always have more games than we have the space to acknowledge. Thankfully, this month brings two titles I'm confident deserve the limelight.

Astroneer sits in a comfortable space between the popular crafting games of recent years and the space exploration titles that have so intrigued sci-fi enthusiasts. I explored an uncharted planet, and it doesn't take long to recognize the depth and exploration options that developer System Era has acheived. As I wander away from my spacecraft, I'm juggling a dwindling oxygen supply, the need to gather resources, the ability to craft new structures, and even a gun that lets me deform or create new environmental objects everywhere I go. I mostly play with the terraforming tool, but the experience is likely different for other players, including one of the game's creators.

"I'm personally the type of Astroneer who focuses less on base building and more on interplanetary exploration," says co-founder Adam Bromell. "I like to get out as far away from my drop pod as possible, for as long as possible." Other players might focus on research, allowing for the crafting of new modules and abilities. You might build a large base or line the planet's immense cave system to see how deep you can go. Explore extensively, and you might uncover crashed wrecks, alien plant-life, or rare minerals to fuel your building. Focus on terrain deformation, and you could create a natural perimeter shield to protect your base from an approaching sand storm.

No matter your choice, you won't have to do it alone. Astroneer supports four-player cooperative play, letting you work together to explore and build. "There is no explicit gameplay that comes from playing with friends," Bromell says. "Playing with friends just means you can be more efficient and effective in your goals and how you achieve them."

Whether working alone or with friends at your side, you can eventually build a ship, create fuel, and launch off to yet more planets awaiting discovery. You can try your hand at exploration when Astroneer hits Steam early access and Xbox/Windows 10 Preview in the coming weeks.

Kitfox Games most recently released the unusual roguelike Moon Hunters, but the team's newest project couldn't be more different. **The Shrouded Isle** flips the tables on traditional management sims, putting the player in a more sinister role. "The original prototype was made for the theme 'you are the monster,' so that should give you an idea of where we're going," says writer Tanya X. Short. "You're the leader of a struggling, isolated village, entrusted with the ancient rites of human sacrifice to appease the gods."

In any given turn, players manage and dictate the actions of the villagers, who are split between five families. Each family member has unique traits and qualities, which should help guide how you use them. "Someone who is lazy and honest, for example, is probably not very useful at harvest time, but could be trustworthy enough to lead evangelism or might be best used as an informant, helping you find out more information about other villagers," Short says. In addition to setting tasks and controlling the village, it also falls on you to choose who is sacrificed to the capricious and uncaring Chernobog in the hopes of staving off the ancient god's ire.

The Shrouded Isle sounds to be as much a theological experiment as a twist on conventional gameplay. "Most cosmologies (even the one Chernobog was historically part of) had some hope of salvation or benevolent deities, and when you remove that side of the equation, even the most mundane task takes on an edge of existential angst – or dark humor," Short says. "Would humanity survive if it didn't believe things could get better? Should it?" It's a challenging concept to confront in a game, and one players will face themselves when Kitfox releases its latest title on PC this February.

The Shrouded Isle
PC

THE SOCCER SIMULATOR THAT DISCOVERED THE BEST PLAYER ON THE PLANET

by Matthew Kato

Sega's **Football Manager** series is more than just a successful PC simulator for the world's favorite sport. It's a video game franchise that has crossed over and is used by real-life clubs and players, helping them scout prospects, calculate potential match outcomes, and more. We talked to **Miles Jacobson**, studio director at developer Sports Interactive, who detailed how the series has become inextricably entwined with the sport.

When did you guys become aware that the game was being used by real clubs?

The first time was actually a long, long time ago. There was a news article in a newspaper in the U.K. called the *Evening Standard*, which is a London-based newspaper. They did an interview with André Villas-Boas, who at the time was [current Manchester United manager] José Mourinho's chief scout. [Villas-Boas] now has become a very successful soccer manager in his own right. He said that he used our data-base for part of his scouting for Chelsea.

There's a player who was at Swansea the last couple of seasons, Bafétimbi Gomis, he's on loan at Marseille this season. He said that he decided to join Swansea because he played as them in Football Manager and realized that he was gonna get good service. And you hear that quite a lot. Ousmane Dembélé is another player who has come out and said in an interview that he uses the game to decide where he's going to be playing.

Very recently, we've been in the news section because we've simulated the different possible outcomes for Brexit in the game. So just the other week I was on a BBC Two show called *Daily Politics* sitting there with two members of Parliament debating Brexit and football, so

it's strange how these things have happened to us, but it's fantastic that we're recognized in that way and seen more now as a soccer brand than we are a gaming brand.

Do you guys have any examples of a particular player or a prediction that was surprisingly prescient, or maybe even gotten wrong?

Well, we're very proud of the fact that our strike rate on the data is around 99.5 percent, which is certainly better than most soccer clubs out there get. I think the most famous example of a player we got right was in the days before child protection law was prevalent, and we could have players who were under the age of 16 in the game. When he was 13, we introduced to the world a young kid called Lionel Messi, who as we all know has become the best player in the world – or if you're Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi has become the second-best player in the world.

But, Alex McLeish, who is a soccer manager who's managed all over Europe, tells a story of when his son Jon came to him and said that he should be trying to sign this guy called Lionel Messi, and three years later Alex McLeish did try and sign Lionel Messi for Rangers in

Scotland just after [Messi] made his first team debut for Barcelona and scored two goals. His son is now a very successful football agent, who probably uses our database to find his clients.

But there are some that we get wrong as well. I think the most famous one that we've got wrong was a guy called Tó Madeira, and the reason that we got that one wrong is because he didn't exist. One of our scouts had added one of his friends into the database for a laugh. That scout doesn't work with us anymore.

There are also players like Freddy Adu, Cherno Samba, Tonton Zola Moukoko who we predicted to be great players, as did a lot of other people, but for various reasons it didn't happen. In Tonton Zola Moukoko's case, it's actually quite sad, in that his mentor passed away when he was 19, and he couldn't cope mentally anymore.

We've been talking about how clubs use the product, but can you give us some examples of gamers using the game to get hired by the clubs themselves?

We've got people who have ended up as commercial director of a small team in Spain. One of our scouts has recently become a data analyst at Plymouth Argyle in the U.K. One of our chief scouts through his work with us ended up also being a chief scout of a team in the Champions League, and does both roles. We have footballers at clubs who are scouts for us, and have had scouts for us who have become footballers. It has definitely been a game that has helped influence people's careers, and that's something we're incredibly proud of. ✤

TELLING STORIES WITHOUT WORDS

How developers are creating sophisticated yet silent interactive narratives

by Elise Favis

M

Mindless humanoids march in single file, shoulders hunched forward and heads bowed down. A young boy sneaks into this systemic traffic of beings, mimicking the others' movements while an overhead spotlight watches his every move. Without dialogue or text to contextualize the situation, you begin to wonder: What brought him here? Why is he being hunted? Is he running away from something, or towards it?

Playdead's Inside tells an ambiguous story about an oppressive, Orwellian world. Speaking volumes without a single word, the narrative creates an emotional connection through its nightmarish atmosphere and leaves the rest up for interpretation. A loneliness creeps over you as you move from one rundown environment to the next; and it's especially effective because of that perpetual silence.

Inside is far from alone in this feat. Several game developers are creatively ditching words, giving their games a more ambiguous story, or one that isn't spoon-fed to the player. It can increase the player's engagement as they try to piece together a story, or it can create a more atmospheric experience. Games such as Inside, Hyper Light Drifter, and Virginia are turning heads by leaving words behind altogether, and use creative approaches such as distinct character body language and minimalist stories to build sophisticated and engaging worlds.

A Creative Constraint

There are several reasons behind tackling a wordless game. For tight-budgeted indie developers, it can be an economical solution, as voice work can be expensive and time-consuming. For the developers at Variable State, however, ditching dialogue altogether for Virginia was a pragmatic approach so that other aspects of the game could be focused on more closely. While this was most practical, it also became key to building the complex story they wished to tell.

"We knew we wanted to make a game that would in some way be about storytelling, but we embarked on some different concepts initially, things that were perhaps more simulation-based. Those were too ambitious," says Jonathan Burroughs, co-founder of Variable State.

Variable State was founded about three years ago by Jonathan Burroughs and Terry Kenny. Both had worked at large triple-A studios, with Burroughs previously at Electronic Arts and Rare, and Kenny had worked on the Grand Theft Auto series at Rockstar as an animator.

"With Terry's background as an animator, we knew we wanted to have a large cast of characters, and I think we just got a little daunted by the idea of doing dialogue as well," Burroughs says. "I think for practical reasons, we shied away from doing dialogue. Although ultimately, I think it proved to be a useful decision for creative reasons as well, and kind of fed into the ambiguity of the storytelling."

Virginia tells the story of FBI agent Anne Tarver, and the story goes through the motions of betrayal, depression, and mystery without saying a word. Taking major influence from *Twin Peaks* and other David Lynch works, Virginia feeds off the idea of putting faith in the player to interpret and piece together an ambiguous narrative. Without words to affirm players' theories, it meant they would have to search for their own answers, even if those assumptions aren't spot on.
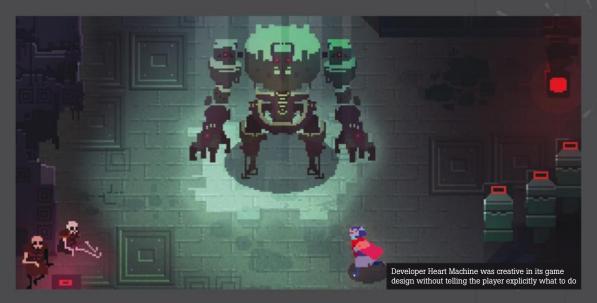
While a wordless narrative is far from easy to tackle, Burroughs doesn't recall the act of writing Virginia's story to be the most challenging. Instead, it was connecting pieces of the puzzle, such as animation, visual cues, and highlighting subtle story beats to the player, that required the most patience to get right.

Virginia relies heavily on body language through character animation to tell its story

"We knew the storytelling would have to be very visual," Burroughs says. "[For example], the scenes you'd be entering – you'd often have to find the characters either just after a conversation had occurred or before one was about to begin. I think it felt far more like a useful creative limitation."

Looking away at the wrong time, or not catching even the slightest hint of body language, can make you feel like you missed an entire cutscene in Virginia. Variable State put huge emphasis on animation, so players have to pay attention to the subtlest of details to comprehend the tale.

"I think one thing I remember [Terry] saying is he had never in his career up to that point had to animate anything as precise as someone removing and putting on a wedding ring," Burroughs says. "There are a lot of animations

Developer Heart Machine was creative in its game design without telling the player explicitly what to do

like that, very subtle, particularly the facial animations, that would require quite a bit of iteration. Terry would put together a performance, and we would play it through, and it just wouldn't read in some instances and you would have to go away and do that again. That process is very time-consuming."

While these challenges were difficult, adopting the wordless narrative concept was decided early in development, where the team wanted to create a story "as broad and unconstrained as possible."

Game Design With Little Instruction
Writing a sophisticated silent story is a challenge, particularly in the realm of interactive media. Designing a game around an ambiguous, wordless story is even trickier, but it can make for a rewarding end result. Hyper Light Drifter trusts that the player will not just figure out its ambiguous narrative, but also understand the mechanics and how to survive.

In Hyper Light Drifter, you're plopped into a dystopian world where monsters

roam freely and you fight them off with little exposition and context as to why. Much of what you see and do is up to your interpretation, and that includes its game design. Because of Hyper Light Drifter's open-ended, non-linear presentation, it was often arduous for Heart Machine to figure out how much to prod the player in the right direction, or how to give them enough visual context without explicitly telling them what to do.

Creating a comprehensible UI without words was a big challenge, from visually pointing out that you can shop for items in one area, to something as simple as swapping clothes.

"We were pretty constrained. Like if you go into the shops, we don't tell you you can upgrade or buy this thing with this item here, we just expect the player to understand as they walk around the world," Preston says. "And we put our faith in players that they'll be smart enough and curious enough to explore around the town and figure it out for themselves and feel good about that."

Even for small details like currency,

or notifying the player that they collected an essential item, much of these smaller mechanics took a lot of brainstorming to be precise, and text was used sparingly to teach the player basic commands. "In the end, we used some small amounts of text to express very important points, like enemies," Preston says. "They will give you ammunition back if you hit them with your sword, for example."

Other Silent Games With Engaging Narratives

• **Journey**
(thatgamecompany, 2012)
Uncover the mysteries of a lost civilization by exploring one gorgeous desert vista to the next. As you drift and soar above the sand, you'll meet other hooded figures like yourself that help you decipher the vague but intriguing narrative.

• **Another World**
(Delphine Software, Interplay Entertainment, 1991)
Following the story of a young scientist named Lester, you find yourself in a strange alien world where you fight for survival. The platformer features no dialogue outside of the gibberish spoken by your alien companion.

• **Machinarium**
(Amanita Design, 2009)
Machinarium is a puzzle-focused point-and-click adventure, in a mechanical world filled with robots. Instead of dialogue, speech is replaced with simple images in text bubbles that aid you in solving its many creative puzzles.

• **Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons**
(Starbreeze Studios, 2013)
In Brothers, you control two siblings with two joysticks, respectively. As the two journey through a land where everyone speaks in an incomprehensible language, they attempt to bring their dying father back some magical water to hopefully cure him. Even without words, Brothers tells a heartwarming tale of family and connection.

For Blendo Games' Thirty Flights of Loving, a game where you play through a heist and its aftermath, developer Brendon Chung went through similar struggles with game design.

Because of its wordless structure, Chung used other methods at his disposal to subtly direct the player. Originally, an early prototype of the game featured dialogue, and NPCs would give hints as to what to do next, such as looking at a crooked painting to find a secret entryway. In the final version, the player is left to their own devices, and Chung had to present these visual hints and cues in a way that wouldn't feel contrived.

"I needed to make the level navigation and the level layouts in such a way that I wanted the player to always exactly know where to go and what to do next," Chung says. "So that was a lot of laying down very specific sight lines, so the player can always see where they need to go, and a lot of lighting so the way you needed to go or what to do always had a spotlight or highlight on it."

Ambiguous Storytelling

Gameplay takes a backseat in games like Virginia and Thirty Flights of Loving. Instead, story plays a more prominent role, even though it may take multiple playthroughs to decipher the narrative's intricacies. For Virginia, symbolism and abstract themes are abundant, but they are often vaguely or ambiguously presented to the player. You're led through the story by an unreliable narrator, where flashbacks and surreal dream sequences warp your perception of reality. Recurring images, from a cardinal to a large buffalo, have a deeper meaning if you're willing to pay close attention. Variable State recommends players to play through the game multiple times to get a firm understanding, but the team doesn't necessarily believe all answers need to be found in order to appreciate the game.

"Often, I can enjoy a thing and not have a total literal understanding of what the meaning is, and then it lingers in my mind for a long time after I've experienced it, and I'm trying to piece together and try to find my own understanding of what that is," Burroughs says. "I find the most satisfying art tends to be that kind of art, and I think we wanted to try and create some version of that in Virginia."

Thirty Flights of Loving's concept of a wordless narrative offers a similar sense of ambiguity. You find yourself

Taking inspiration from film, Thirty Flights of Loving uses cinematic effects like jump cuts to help weave its tale

In Hyper Light Drifter, you're left to your own devices to figure out much of the gameplay and ambiguous narrative

in a world filled with blocky caricatures who talk using indiscernible dialogue. You don't understand a word they're saying, and most of the time, you'll jump from one scene to the next with little context.

"I think some of my games appeal to a broader audience, and some of them appeal to a smaller audience," Chung says. "I came into this with a feeling that Thirty Flights of Loving would appeal to a fairly specific kind of person. There are some details that are left for you to fill in the blanks, and I think there are certain people that that appeals to, including myself."

Cinematic Influence

Because Thirty Flights of Loving is wordless, it draws inspiration from film in terms of narrative techniques. With its repetitive use of jump cuts, you'll move from one area to the next in one quick moment, creating a disorienting effect that works well for the non-linear story.

To make the feeling less jarring, Chung played with audio effects so sounds from a prior scene would bleed into the next. For example, if you were chased by cop cars in the scene beforehand, those sirens will continue to be heard in the distance, then slowly fade, as you enter the next area.

"I think my intention was to play with the language of movies. I think that we have seen so many films, and watched so much TV, that we've kind of gained this understanding of how movies operate. Like when you see the cut, it means something," Chung says. "Whereas with video games, it's still young enough that we're still figuring

out how games talk to us, and what vocabulary we have there."

Thirty Flights of Loving's dizzying use of jump cuts was a major influence for Variable State's work on Virginia. Virginia uses the same cinematic editing techniques to tell a story with multiple scenes in a snappy, almost disorienting way. It creates a narrative pacing rarely seen in video games, and one that is more prominent in film.

In both Virginia and Thirty Flights of Loving, you're constantly shown something new, or find yourself somewhere drastically different from one second to the next, which Burroughs believes makes the experience more rewarding and gives a cinematic vibe to the game.

"Particularly in open world games, you often have a lot of travelling between destinations where there isn't necessarily a lot of storytelling happening," Burroughs says. "You can imagine a long walk say in The Witcher or Grand Theft Auto could be abbreviated without you losing any of the substance of the story. So that's part of what made the editing so appealing."

The technique of 'show don't tell' becomes an extreme with wordless games, as they rely less on exposition than other titles. This approach can make for a more atmospheric and engrossing world. For Hyper Light Drifter, Preston drew from his background in animation to create a solid narrative foundation for the game. Preston and his colleague Casey Hunt had previously worked on silent animation projects together, and brought that cinematic influence to Hyper Light Drifter, though Preston points out that film and video games have some

important distinctions.

"With film you have a little more direction, where you can lead the person's eye with the camera a little better. It's a very linear medium," Preston says. "But with games, because the player has choice, at least in our design and the game we wanted to create, it's hard to kind of siphon people into the right spots at the right time, unless you create specific choke-points."

Because of the non-linear structure of Hyper Light Drifter, the team had to figure out where and how to insert big story beats. Without words, this became an ambitious task. Instead of dialogue, some NPCs in the game speak to you through images that tell short micro-narratives, giving you context and limited lore about the world you explore.

"That was one of the bigger challenges, like, when do we put these beats into the story in a more open design. Because we weren't creating a linear game," Preston says.

Building Profound Stories

The idea that self-imposed restrictions breed creativity runs deep for these game developers. Virginia's themes and its intricate and abstract symbolism may not have been as profound had the game featured text or dialogue. Hyper Light Drifter is not just fun to play, but it is a joy to explore because of the amplified atmospheric tones because of it being wordless. Games such as these revel in their narrative ambiguity, and continue to propel this young medium into a new era of sophisticated storytelling in unique ways. ◈

PAPER MARIO: COLOR SPLASH

Many think Nintendo's lovable plumber can do no wrong, but the last few entries in the Paper Mario series have drawn criticism for their downplayed RPG elements and general lack of NPC diversity. We tapped producer Kensuke Tanabe for his take on this criticism and to find out what fans can expect from the series' future. *by Ben Reeves*

In the American release, there's a joke about Mario's "Lost Levels." How different are the jokes in the Japanese script? Is there a lot of region-specific humor?
For this English translation, we took extra care (even more than usual) to preserve the original text's nuances, especially the keywords that were used as hints. Even then, there were some nuances that we just could not reproduce. In the part you were referring to for the Japanese version, Huey just gets surprised because the color disappeared from the Little Paint Star and turned white. There is really no joke here. English translators added the joke about Super Mario Lost Levels in English text to make it funnier, but Japanese audiences will not understand it.

That reminds me. I worked on localizing the text for Donkey Kong Country 1 and 2, which released on Super Nintendo, but it was so full of hard-to-translate jokes that I rewrote them into completely different jokes or useful hints by looking at the game graphics. As a result, the feel that the European/American audiences get from the jokes in the Donkey Kong Country series are very different from what the Japanese version provides.

Why did you guys remove the leveling system from the series?
Color Splash is an action/adventure game with puzzle-solving at its core. So, it is true that we did not use the typical RPG system where the player character grows stronger by collecting experience points and upping various parameters of the player character. This is because the concept of levels does not directly relate to puzzle-solving. However, there is actually a leveling system included in this title. We made it so that your maximum paint capacity will gradually increase if you collect a certain amount of the hammer-shaped items that drop when you defeat an enemy. This is a meaningful growth element in this title since painting is involved in both battle and puzzle-solving.

There are a lot of steps to painting a card during combat. What were the discussions like in the office when trying to streamline combat?
We prepared other advanced controls and button controls for the combat U.I. If you use the advanced controls, after you are done painting a card you can flick the card without pressing the button. At first we were developing a U.I. very similar to the advanced controls. However, as a result of monitoring the staff themselves, we realized that control mistakes were made frequently playing using the controls without fully understanding the controls. Considering Nintendo's user base, we need to anticipate that children around the ages of 7-10 will be playing as well, so it is reasonable to think that they might play without being able to thoroughly understand the controls. We decided to make the U.I. such that you have to carefully check each individual step to proceed for the basic controls, even if that

was frustrating. Then, we thought that once users understood the control steps, they could transition to the advanced controls.

Why haven't some of the old NPCs from the early Paper Mario games returned?
Mario is not an IP that I created. From the position of someone borrowing the IP, I think it's only natural to show respect to the person who created it, and let that feeling of respect guide us. When Miyamoto-san, the father of Mario, asks us, "Could you make a game with only characters from the Mario family?" I think it's only natural for us to give it our best shot. In other words, we are not currently thinking about returning to old NPCs. Incidentally, I do think Color Splash may have proven that we can still make a game entertaining, even if our original characters don't appear as NPCs. And with that belief, we will keep on continuing to do our best.

Would you ever consider bringing back companion characters with different abilities?
Personally, I don't give much thought to how we are leaving old methods behind in any series, not just Paper Mario. I always prioritize thinking about how we can build new methods and new elements. Of course, there were some series where we have not made big changes to the systems, but sometimes that's because we feel as though these systems haven't been perfected yet, or the gameplay can be expanded even further. We felt both of those things in Color Splash. However, I do feel as though we reached the end of where Color Splash is headed, so if we get the chance to continue the series, I think we'll want to create a Paper Mario with a different system.

afterwords

MAFIA III

Mafia III is one of the most divisive game released in 2016. Hangar 13's attempts to tackle systemic racism earned praise, while the repetitive combat and padding brought the studio's first title a fair bit of criticism. We talked with Hangar 13 studio head Haden Blackman about its failures, successes, and making games that tackle touchy subjects.

by Javy Gwaltney

How has the studio handled the reception to the game so far?
It was little mixed in terms of critical reviews, but we knew going into it that the game was going to be polarizing. The sales have done really well in spite of some of the negative reviews. What's been gratifying these last couple of weeks is a lot of critics have got what we were trying to do with the game. Having it called a cultural milestone really lifted everyone's spirts.

The game takes place during 1968 and tackles racism, but it's also a game being released in the wake of Ferguson and Black Lives Matter. Do you think those events have shaped perception of the game?
When we started working on the game, none of that stuff had happened. We were focused on telling a story and really immersing you in our version of New Orleans, and when that stuff happened, we stayed very focused on the game. I mean, I'd be lying if I said it didn't affect us in some way. We all have opinions about everything, but the game always came first for us. The best art reflects the here and now and feels universal. It absolutely changes the conversation – sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. We're proud to have made a game that forces people to think about things other games don't.

Do you think games like Mafia III have political power even if they're not intended to be political games?
The fact you're asking that question kind of proves that they do. When we set out to make the game, we never wanted the game to be solely about race. My goal was that if we could get people to think about racism a little bit and pause for a moment and wonder, "Why are the police watching me here? I'm not doing anything," then they realize it's because of his race and that is an experience that is going on today for many people, then getting them to think that is a good thing.

Games can be escapist fantasies, but the best ones will always do that and leave you thinking about the world you live and who you are as a person.

A lot of Mafia III essentially gamifies racism. It seems like the game doesn't really leave any stone unturned. Were there any ideas that didn't make it off the drawing board?
As a small team developing an open-world game, we really had to pick our battles. We decided to double down on the things that make the game unique.

In terms of things specifically related to race, we entertained the notion of giving the player the ability to bribe the police when they've been pulled over. And we passed on that because it sort of watered down the experience. Just having that blue indicator show up when you're in traffic or walking through the world results in a specific kind of paranoia, and I think that resonated with gamers of color.

We also went back and forth on the use of language and some of the racial slurs in particular. There were times where it felt like it was becoming background noise. So we stripped a lot of that out to make sure we were using it in context and it had meaning and drive home how shameful this part of our past is.

Can we expect more games from Hangar 13 that tackle tough subjects in the triple-A space?
We're in early discussions about what we're doing next and pretty focused on our ongoing content plans; we've got free updates coming soon and story-driven expansions, and I think these kind of touch on these themes and explore them from different angles. We're using all of that to experiment with some gameplay stuff for the future.

I don't know why I would be in this industry if I wasn't excited about taking risks. Creatively, we as an industry have to take risks and people can argue whether or not we were rewarded for that. I don't think we should be scared away from doing this sort of thing because the medium is evolving quickly. I think in general there's no other place you can experiment with this stuff and take these kinds of risks than with games, and I don't know why you wouldn't when you have the opportunity. So I definitely think we'll try and do stuff like this in the future, but at the end of the day, it is about building compelling entertainment and immersive experiences. ◈

Role Players

by Brian Shea

How popular video game voice actors took a Dungeons & Dragons campaign from a single table to millions of screens around the world

Imagine a game of Dungeons & Dragons between Ellie from The Last of Us, Chun-Li from Street Fighter, Phoenix Wright from Ace Attorney, and Knuckles from Sonic the Hedgehog, with Overwatch's McCree serving as dungeon master. While that scenario isn't going to happen, a D&D campaign featuring the actors who lend their voices to those characters has been running for more than a year, attracting millions of viewers.

The idea for *Critical Role* came from a game of Dungeons & Dragons that was started as a part of actor Liam O'Brien's birthday celebration.

"Liam hadn't played for a while, and I was running games," says dungeon master Matthew Mercer. "I was like, 'Hey man, if you want to play, let's get some friends together,' and so we did a one-off that turned into a campaign because everybody enjoyed themselves so much."

Two years after that original game, TV and movie actress Ashley Johnson was shooting a web series called *Spooked* with actress Felicia Day, who was serving as executive producer.

Day had recently co-founded a multimedia production company and commercial YouTube channel called Geek & Sundry. When Day noticed that Johnson had a copy of the D&D *Player's Handbook*, she inquired about it, discovering Johnson was in a game with voice actors like Mercer (whom Day already knew). Day immediately asked the group to consider streaming it as a show on the channel.

While the idea was enticing, the group was concerned about taking their fun private game public. "Whenever you put something you love on the internet, there's a very good chance that the internet is just going to tear you apart," Mercer says. "So we had a real fear of it possibly tainting something that was so personal to us."

Actress Marisha Ray echoes Mercer's concern that it would destroy something they loved. "We all kind of took a vow at the table that if it wasn't fun or it started compromising friendships or anything like that, that we would quit because it's not worth it," she says.

The group decided that if they were going

to do it, then the format should provide as little disruption to the game flow as possible. Streaming on Geek & Sundry's Twitch channel allowed for more free-form broadcasts before being archived on the YouTube channel, allowing great convenience and flexibility for the actors' busy schedules.

Even though the format was set, the group was concerned that nobody would want to sit and watch people play Dungeons & Dragons for hours on end. "I think we just thought, 'Well, whether or not people watch it, we'll just try this and it'll be an adventure, and if nobody watches it, we'll just go back into the living room and play it," Johnson says. "No big deal.'"

Despite the cast's concerns, the show has resonated with fans of both tabletop games and the personalities. The initial episode has more than 2.5 million views on YouTube. Subsequent episodes have hundreds of thousands of views.

"The amazing thing is that it's just blown up… not only for them being famous voice actors and amazing performers, but their love of D&D is so authentic," Day says. "It's really important to Geek & Sundry because it's our flagship show, and support really anchors our livestream programming that's every single day."

When I ask Mercer why he thinks it has

resonated with so many people, he laughs in bewilderment. "I don't know, man!" he says. "For a lot of older gamers who don't have the time to play anymore because of work and family and responsibilities, this is their kind of game-by-proxy. They can listen to the adventure like a radio play, or watch it and still feel like this is part of their own adventure, so this is an outlet for that thing they miss."

Travis Willingham, who plays Grog Strongjaw in the campaign, thinks one of the reasons it has been such a hit is because it helps further smash the early stereotypes associated with D&D. "There was a stigma for a long time for people who would play D&D – this basement-dwelling, mouth-breathing thing, and that's not the case at all," he says. "Our cast, the group of our friends is just made up of jocks and voice actors and directors and people who come from all backgrounds."

With so many backgrounds in play, *Critical Role* is also helping to push away the outdated stereotype that D&D is a game only men play. "I think having this kind of visibility of seeing a game with a diverse cast with men and women and seeing the different aspects of the game that we bring to it makes a huge difference," says actress Laura Bailey. "A lot of girls have written me on Twitter or on Facebook and said, 'I never knew this was something I was allowed to do, and now that I've seen you guys playing, I've started actively finding a group. I went to a local game shop and I found people that are playing, and I'm now playing D&D regularly.'"

For Johnson, the misconception that the game was only for men prevented her from checking Dungeons & Dragons out sooner, but breaking down walls isn't the only reason she's glad *Critical Role* has strong female representation. "I think it definitely changes the dynamic of a game if you have a co-ed game, and I think it brings a lot of different arcs to the storyline that you're playing," she says.

The game has been running since March 2015, garnering hundreds of thousands of viewers every week, but one major mystery remains: What happens when this game ends? When I ask that question to each cast member, they all give some variation of Bailey's answer – "I have no idea!"

"I know a lot of people are nervous about their characters dying," Willingham says. "If I die, hopefully it's in a blaze of glory, and maybe we'll mourn my character for an episode and then some random-ass person comes walking into your world and joins the train."

Though the mystery looms, Mercer is looking forward to whatever comes next. "Whoever survives will be sunsetted into legend," he says. Then we'll maybe take a little break, play a couple of small games in other systems to cleanse the palate, and maybe begin a whole new journey with level one characters."

Johnson doesn't know what's next for *Critical Role* either, but she knows playing with this group of friends has given her a lifelong appreciation of Dungeons & Dragons. "If this game ends we would maybe start a new campaign or just go back to the living room and start from scratch," she says. "I don't feel like this group of people will ever stop playing D&D with each other, whether it's this campaign or another one." ◈

Meet The Main Cast

Matthew Mercer
Role: Dungeon Master
Best Known For: McCree (Overwatch), Jack Cooper (Titanfall 2), Kanji (Persona 4), Leon S. Kennedy (Resident Evil 6, Resident Evil Revelations)

Ashley Johnson
Role: Pike Trickfoot
Best Known For: Ellie (The Last Of Us), Petra (Minecraft: The Story Mode), Gortys (Tales from the Borderlands)

Liam O'Brien
Role: Vax'ildan
Best Known For: Barker (Titanfall 2), Gollum (Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor), Illidan Stormrage (World of Warcraft)

Laura Bailey
Role: Vex'ahlia
Best Known For: Chun-Li (Street Fighter), Kait Diaz (Gears of War 4), Nadine Ross (Uncharted 4), Olympia Vale (Halo 5: Guardians)

Travis Willingham
Role: Grog Strongjaw
Best Known For: Harvey Dent (Batman: The Telltale Seried), Knuckles (Sonic the Hedgehog), Guile (Street Fighter)

Marisha Ray
Role: Keyleth
Best Known For: Mikado (Fire Emblem Fates), Margaret (Persona), Laura (The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel)

Taliesin Jaffe
Role: Percy de Rolo III
Best Known For: Blanka (Street Fighter), Thancred (Final Fantasy XIV)

Sam Riegel
Role: Scanlan Shorthalt
Best Known For: Phoenix Wright (Ace Attorney), Teddie (Persona 4), Griefer (Minecraft: Story Mode)

photo credits: Pamela Joy, Ashley Johnson photo credit: Zack DeZon

SPECIAL ONE-SHOT RPG WITH VOICE ACTORS LIAM O'BRIEN AND FRIENDS

The image on the left sidebar with vertical text.

The Good

KINGDOM HEARTS III isn't coming out in the near future, but developer Square Enix has released some screens for the title showing off a new Drive Form called Guard Form. As the name implies, this turns your Keyblade into a shield. There is also another unnamed form which changes it into a hammer.

The Bad

EVOLVE is being taken away from developer Turtle Rock and given to an in-house team by publisher 2K Games. This means consoles won't get the Stage 2 free-to-play format currently available on PC. For its part, 2K says it will "continue to evaluate the possibility of that vision coming to console."

The Ugly

NO MAN'S SKY developer Hello Games appeared to have been hit by hackers, who tweeted out the message, "No Man's Sky was a mistake" from its account. This also may have extended to the company's emails. The game has been wrapped in controversy since its release, with some people charging that the experience that was delivered wasn't what was advertised before launch.

Quotable

"If I was only set on selling as many consoles as we could, I wouldn't put our games on Windows and I wouldn't move Xbox Live to Windows... But that's not what's driving us."

– **Phil Spencer**, head of Xbox, says that even with the Xbox One S doing really well, selling systems isn't a goal in and of itself.

connect 28

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Fighting Game Characters

by Suriel Vazquez

Scorpion
Mortal Kombat

First place was a no-brainer. Getting the jump on an opponent with a teleport is immensely satisfying, and "GET OVER HERE!" is second only to "FINISH HIM!" when it comes to fighting-game quotes. He's also evolved his play style over the years without detracting from what makes him fighting games' most iconic character.

01

Chun-Li
Street Fighter

Fireballs, Spinning Bird Kicks, wall jumps, air hops, lightning-fast kicks – Chun-Li's got 'em all. She also has one of the most enduring aesthetic designs in a fighter, showcasing Street Fighter's multiculturalism without veering too far into anything too eye-rolling or offensive.

02

Ryu
Street Fighter

Ryu is comfort food. The go-to character for legions of fans, his trademark moves have molded the fighting genre for decades. His reliability means he hasn't evolved as much as other characters over the years, but then, you wouldn't want that from comfort food.

03

Sub-Zero
Mortal Kombat

The Grandmaster of the Lin Kuei clan may not have the appeal of Scorpion, but his defensive play style has its own place. The ice ball is still a unique move in fighting games, as is his protective clone. Few fighters inspire as much fear on the approach.

04

Dhalsim
Street Fighter

Decades later, Dhalsim's stretching limbs resonate as a brilliant, strange feat of fighting-game design. The range of his punches and kicks is offset by their wind-up times, and getting close (or better yet, countering his whip-like attacks with your own punches) offers an interesting challenge.

05

Yoshimitsu
SoulCalibur/Tekken

Every round against Yoshimitsu can turn into an absurd guessing game, as he bounces on his sword, sits down while pumping up his sword upward, then finishes the round by impaling both himself and his opponent. His look also varies wildly from game to game, making him a fun addition to any fighting-game cast.

06

Jigglypuff
Super Smash Bros.

In a game known for its airborne mobility, Jigglypuff are hard to beat. They get five airborne jumps, and Pound gives them a strong horizontal recovery while also creating an offense. Rest is also one of the biggest gambles you can take in fighting games, which means they're always fun to watch.

07

Guile
Street Fighter

Guile best personifies the feel of the charge character, rewarding patience and a bit of foresight with powerful defensive tools. His Sonic Booms can go toe-to-toe with any fireball, and his Flash Kick reminds everyone to never jump at him while he's crouching. And the 'do is timeless.

08

Captain Falcon
Super Smash Bros.

Though originally an F-Zero racer, Captain Falcon found his real calling as a fighter In Super Smash Bros. Good that he did, since the Falcon Punch is one of the best fighting-game moves of all time, and his crushing airborne knee is one of the most satisfying moves to land.

09

Morrigan Aensland
Darkstalkers

Originally Darkstalkers' take on the Ryu archetype, Morrigan has grown into a more complex character. Her most interesting iteration may be in Marvel Vs. Capcom 3, in which she could create a barrage of high and low fireballs that required a high level of finesse to pull off.

10

The Smooth A Cappella YouTube Sensation

Back in 2013, Max Gleason posted an accappella version of "Zelda's lullaby" on his Smooth McGroove YouTube channel. It featured 10 versions of himself singing the iconic tune in unison without any instruments. He enjoyed the process, and began posting new a cappella video game music videos every week. Over the next few months he posted versions of Ocarina of Time's "Song of Storms," Mega Man X's "Spark Mandrill's Theme," and Street Fighter II's "Guile's Theme." Each drove lots of traffic, boosting him from just a few hundred subscribers to numbers well beyond 10,000. Today, he has more than 1,500,000 subscribers and continues to post new a cappella music videos nearly every week.

Name:
Max "*Smooth McGroove*" Gleason
YouTube:
youtube.com/
smoothmcgroove
Location:
Oklahoma City
Career:
Online Video
Game Singer
Twitter:
@SmoothMcGroove

interview by Kyle Hilliard

What's your musical background and education?
I studied a bit of piano in elementary school, but switched to drums soon afterwards, which lasted all the way until college. Drums for life!

Can you walk me through the process of going from making acappella video game music videos as a hobby to it becoming a full-time job?
It's like anything, really. Once you realize you enjoy something, like music, you find ways to work at it and make it fun. Naturally it starts as a hobby, but fun and unexpected things can happen as you keep working at it, experimenting, and improving.

I remember when I started my YouTube channel, looking around to see if anyone was doing anything else similar and I was like, "Oh man! This guy has 40,000 subscribers! If I could do that, maybe in two years I'll hit that, and I'll be able to spend more time recording."

What was your full-time job before Smooth McGroove?
Drum teacher.

Why the focus on classic game soundtracks as opposed to modern game soundtracks?
Classic soundtracks generally have more focused melodies, which I really enjoy. It also makes it easier to start picking apart the songs to sing.

What projects are you working on or do you have plans to work on outside of your YouTube channel output?
I'm always working on music, whether as Smooth McGroove or otherwise.

What has been the hardest or most technically challenging song to record?
Any song with tons of parts can give me a challenging time, such as "One Winged Angel." Probably that one.

Start to finish, how long does each video take to produce? What's the process?
On average it takes about 40 hours from start to finish.

The process is pretty standard now. I'll pick out a song, find a good version – either download it or I will buy it from somewhere – and listen to that in the highest quality. I'll pull up my recording console and pick out the most obvious tracks first, usually the main track, then the bass, and then the percussion. I'll do those and I'll record a scratch version, which is like

rehearsal at the same time as picking the song apart. Once I do that I'll go back and listen for which parts I am not picking up. There are string harmonies in the background? I'll pick those out and do those. Is it a three-part harmony, or a two-part harmony? I'll do that. Listen to it, listen to all the stuff I have recorded next to the main track, and I will either be happy with it, or I'll change some stuff. Once I do that, it's all just taking those scratch tracks I recorded and making them better. Making the lead parts sound pro, getting all the inflections I want in there, making sure the levels are right and all that stuff, and it's just work from there.

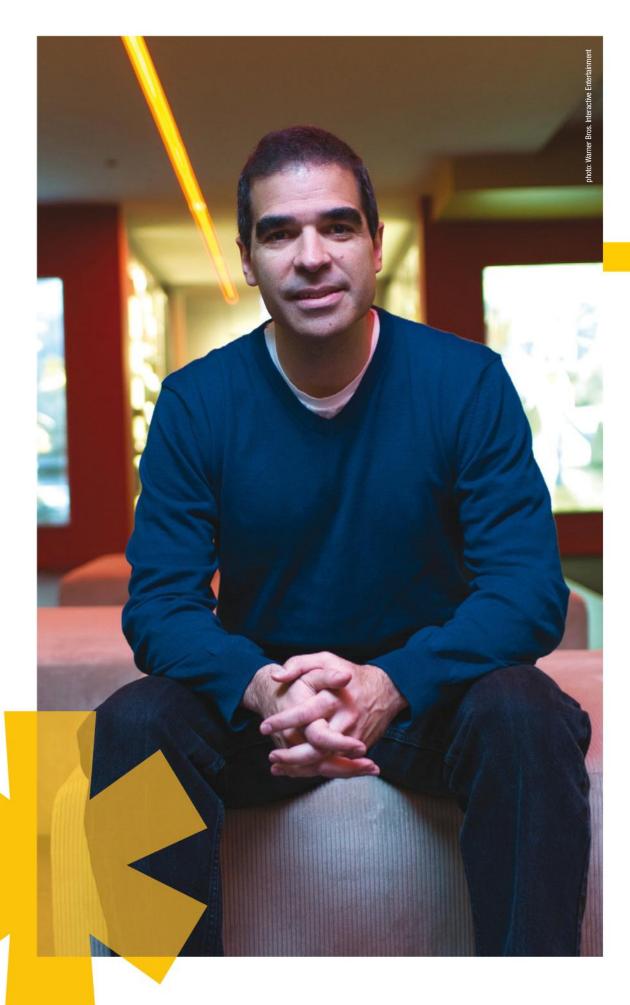**How much would you have to be paid to shave your beard and cut your hair?**
One crillion dollars.

Do you have a favorite video game music composer?
Probably Nobuo Uematsu.

What are your top five favorite games?
The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, Final Fantasy VII, Diablo II, Super Mario World, and the whole Warcraft series. ◈

Kombat Veteran

Ed Boon has likely been making video games longer than you've been alive. Years before he became the steward of the Mortal Kombat franchise, Boon was programming pinball and arcade games for companies that no longer exist. But despite his over 30-year history in the industry, he's only ever really had one job.

To get a full view of what such a storied career looks like, we talked with Boon about his early days at Williams Electronics, some of the names Mortal Kombat could have had, and what it's like working on the same series for over two decades.

interview by Andrew Reiner and Suriel Vazquez

Let's go all the way back, way back to first time you saw interactive entertainment. Take us through that day.

I think my first interaction with any kind of interactive game, per se, would probably be pinball machines. From way, way back in the days of grade school. Our bowling alley had a bunch of pinball machines and we would play them. At the time, there was a concept called winning a free game. So you would get good at a game and the whole theory was, "play on this for a long time with a quarter."

Where did you grow up and go to that pinball arcade?

I was born in Rogers Park, which is in Chicago, and we moved to Evanston/Skokie which is like a suburb of Chicago when I was in grade school. I basically lived there until I went away to college – and then got this job, as a matter of fact. I lived there for about the first two years of my job as a pinball programmer. I was saving up to buy a condo because I was on this big kick of, "I'm never going to pay rent in my life."

Can you recall the name of that first pinball game you played? Do you remember the very first game you touched?

I don't know the very first one. I know one of the first ones that I was like, "Oh, I like this machine" was a game called Evel Knievel. I remember Evel Knievel and Bobby Hull Hockey.

I remember Missile Command, Millipede, Stargate, and Robotron. It was a huge chapter of my life playing these games. While I was playing them, I just started noticing the name Williams above in the marquee where the title of the game was. I think when I was playing pinball I would see Bally/Midway and probably saw Williams at one point, but I remember Bally being the one that really stood out.

So then in high school, and playing all those games into college… I had made one resume my entire life and it was for when I was a senior in college. I put a little asterisk on the bottom, [under] hobby or something: "interest in video games and video graphics." All these kind of more mundane points and then a little asterisk at the bottom saying, "interested in video games."

I guess a headhunter saw that and sent my resume to Williams Electronics, to the head of their pinball software at the time. I go in for an interview at Williams and I'm talking to the guy, and I thought it was a job for programming video games because it honestly never even occurred to me that somebody would write software for a video game.

So the guy is talking to me, and he says, "Pinball…" and I say, "Pinball? What?" And he goes, "Yeah this is for a pinball programmer." I remember asking him, which was kind of dumb at the time, "Do people program pinball machines? People actually program them?" And he said, "Yeah, this is what the position is for." And so I was kind of like, "Oh, ok. Well that sounds cool."

So I'm talking to him, and then they bring me to the next guy and then the next guy. I'm talking to him and he says, "Oh what games of ours do you like?" And I say, "Oh, I like Defender, Robotron, Joust," and then the guy says, "Oh yeah, I programmed Joust." And I remember also saying to him, "Get outta here!" Like I literally thought he was joking with me! His name is Bill Pfutzenreuter and he programmed Joust and he was now a pinball programmer, and he was telling me about that game.

And then I'm talking about Defender and he goes, "Yeah down the hall is a guy named Eugene Jarvis, who did that game." Then I started getting starstruck. I remember reading an article about Eugene Jarvis and Larry DeMar and how they split off from Williams and did Robotron. From my perspective, they were the first rock stars. These guys were like my heroes. I kind of felt like, "Oh my god I've got to get this job." So they hired me.

While the job has had a number of incarnations (I moved to the video department and then I did the home games), it's really the only job [I've had]. It was Williams Electronics and then they split into Bally/Midway and then Midway Games and then Warner Bros. – it's actually been the only job I've ever had. I've never quit or been fired.

Mortal Kombat

Mortal Kombat 9

Get outta town! You didn't have a paper route? You didn't work at a grocery store?
Actually, that's a good point. When I was 16, I worked at a grocery store and I worked at a Cadillac dealer cleaning cars. But in terms of out of school, you're done with school, this is your livelihood thing. It's the only job I've had.

So I had worked on pinball machines, and I also started doing voice stuff because at the time there was no such thing as hiring an actor or professional. They were like, "Hey can you come in here and pretend like you're a guy in the alley who's being robbed?" and then you'd make up a voice or something like that.

So I was kind of doing that, programming pinball machines. And at the time Eugene Jarvis had come back to the company, and he started up a new hardware division and they started working on a game called NARC, which came out at around 1990 or something like that [it was 1988 – Editor]. And so they had this really cool hardware, and I just kind of kept going downstairs to look at what they were doing and saying, "Oh god this is so cool." I love doing pinball machines, but the guys downstairs were doing video games and that was the cool place to hang out.

Mark Tremell and John Tobias were working on Smash TV, which was this kind of Robotron-type of game, which was awesome. And then Eugene and I

started working on a game called High Impact Football, which was a football game with digitized graphics. And again, we weren't hiring professional hire actors… I was the football player. I put on shoulder pads and stuff like that and ran on treadmills.

It sounds like a friendly invitation, almost how Valve is run right now; "Hey come work on my project."
It was much smaller in scale. Teams were four, five, six guys doing a game together, and the project would be nine months or they were a year long. Which is laughable now. It was very much off the top of your head, impromptu. There were no game design documents, there was nothing formal about it. "How could we do this? Well I guess we can try this." Invention by necessity and all that. So this is the first video game I'm working on and it's weird, manipulating images that are you.

After Super High Impact, I wanted to do something new, so I worked on Mortal Kombat. During High Impact Football, I got to know a lot of guys in the studio and John Tobias was one of them. We were kind of hanging out, and Street Fighter II had come out and the biggest thing was, "Look how big the images are on the screen! Oh my god! Look at that!" Like this fighting game had very stylized graphics, like hand-drawn, borderline anime. And we said, "let's make the bad-boy version of this game. Let's do something with

blood. Kind of like the MTV version of Street Fighter."

So when you were getting Mortal Kombat started and were doing your tests of the characters, were you digitizing yourselves in the game? Or did you bring in actors from day one?
In the very beginning, we wanted it to be a game starring Jean-Claude Van Damme and it was supposed to be… I think *Bloodsport* was a pretty recent release that he had.

We made a demo and sent it over to Jean-Claude Van Damme. So we had put together this tape and this demo and kind of showed mocked-up graphics of what we would envision it to look like, and then they contacted our guy who talks with the licenses and stuff and they said, "Sorry, he's already signed a deal with Sega" or somebody like that. Which was weird because we never saw that game. I'm still waiting for that game to come out 25 years later.

So we said, "Ok, well, let's do our own characters." John Tobias at the time, he was like, "Oh I know a bunch of martial artists that I went to high school with. Let's bring some of them in and let's shoot them." It wasn't even blue screen or green screen at the time. We just shot them in front of a wall and manually ripped away the edges frame by frame. And we did that super fast. We got a demo of the game running.

The big thing was this uppercut. Once we got this uppercut going and the screen shook and the guy flew up in the air, then like suddenly everybody is coming into my office. It was something that people started talking about.

We put the game on test in an arcade like five months after we started it. With six characters. Sonya Blade didn't exist. And there were four guys on the team: Myself, John Tobias, a guy named John Vogel, and Dan Forden who did music. And that was the entire team. Looking back now, it was odd just because.... I think in my head it's just two guys on the screen. How hard can it be? I swear to god somewhere in my basement I have footage of that first test.

What were you calling it back then? Obviously it was maybe Jean-Claude Van Damme's Bloodsport. What were your initial names for it?
The first name before Van Damme passed… we wanted to call it Van Damme. We just wanted to see huge letters, "Van Damme," when you walked by. You couldn't pass that up. When that was gone, we threw so many names out there. Kumite was high on the list. Dragon Attack, which was a song by Queen. That was one that we were messing around with too. Death Blow and all these kind of… Death Blow, Final Fist, or something… all these crazy, almost cliché martial art movie titles. And then one time, we wrote the word "Combat" on the screen, on my grease board and changed it to a "K."

Why did you change it to a "K?"
Just to be different. Just to make it seem unique or something like that. The pinball designer that I had worked with on a few games, Steve Ritchie, he did a whole bunch of really successful pinball machines. He was just sitting in my office and we were talking and he's like, "What's that?" and I said, "Yeah we're trying to come up with a name. It's Kombat." And he goes, "Why don't you call it Mortal Kombat?" And I was like, "Oh my god, that's it!"

When you guys said you wanted to do that bad-boy version of Street Fighter or a fighting game, do you remember those initial talks of what that consisted of? Can you recall that original vision?
Yeah. Nobody was expecting anything out of us. We were just kind of working quietly, taking trips to costumes stores, trying to put together some kind of costume that might look cool with our video game digitized technology. It was great. Nobody was expecting anything so we just quietly did that.

And then all of sudden, there were expectations. And this was the first game that both myself and John were kind of heading ourselves. We had only each done just like one or two games. So there was no expectation for it, and that was very cool because we didn't have pressure to finish something until the game started looking and playing fun. That's when the pressure started.

After the game came out, everyone knew what it was including people like Joe Lieberman, who started lobbying for stuff like the ESRB. Did you guys feel that pressure at all?
No. The timing of that is interesting and a lot people don't realize that we made our game and then it was a huge arcade hit. It was ridiculous. Our company was just focused on producing as many of these as possible. I think at one time there might have been running the assembly line 24 hours or something. It was ridiculous.

Acclaim really smelled blood and to their credit, they identified Mortal Kombat as a potential real mass market [hit] outside of the arcade experience. I remember them telling us, "We're gonna spend $10 million advertising this game." I remember saying, "You guys better calm down. [Laughs] You're betting too much!" And I was totally wrong. When they brought it to the mass market and made a TV commercial, [with] that infamous kid screaming "MORTAL KOMBAT!" and stuff, that's when suddenly it hit the radar, and that's when it started getting attention for the violence.

Maybe we can transition with Midway and talk about the unfortunate closing and the next chapter in creating NetherRealm. Or if you think we are missing anything in Mortal Kombat 4 or Deadly Alliance, that era.
Those two are kind of related to each other. Acclaim had exclusive rights to all of Midway's games for a certain period of years. So they had Mortal Kombat 1, NBA Jam, Mortal Kombat II, and then NBA Jam Tournament Edition. Those were like four back-to-back games that were multimillion-selling games that were all under the Acclaim deal. I know that's when Midway management decided they were going get into publishing home games. Because we were strictly about coin-operated arcade games, and then Acclaim was handling the home conversions and the advertising for it.

So we published the home version of Mortal Kombat 4, and then I remember us kind of raising the question of, "Should we just go directly go into the home for the next Mortal Kombat game?" And we spoke to our arcade distributors, and for years had already been saying how much the market had gone down and how expensive these games were, and our hardware was getting more expensive. So after talking with them we made the kind of the difficult decision to skip arcades and go directly into the home.

And Deadly Alliance was huge. It sold way more than Mortal Kombat 4 did. 2002, I believe was Deadly Alliance, and then 2004 was Deception, and 2006 was Armageddon, and in between then we did an action-adventure game called Shaolin Monks which was between, I think, Deception and Armageddon.

So there was a period of time where we were really cranking out the games. In my opinion, a little bit too frequently. Even though Shaolin Monks, the action-adventure game, was a different type of game, it was still Mortal Kombat again, a year after the last fighting game and whatnot. So that was a very busy time. But after Armageddon, it had fifty-something characters and had Motor Kombat. I certainly felt it had just reached a point of, "Ok, we're not going to do 70 characters next. We're not going to grow anymore."

So the whole idea, one of our marketing guys, and again this was the tail-end of Midway, one of marketing heads developed a relationship with DC Comics, and we were talking about doing a DC fighting game and then he suggested, "Hey what about a Mortal Kombat versus game?"

The challenge was, well, obviously we're not going to cut Batman's head off. We're not going to cut Superman's head off. But it's a Mortal Kombat game. Do you make it an M-rated game or do you make it a T-rated game? And we had decided to make it a T-rated game. People who loved Mortal Kombat for what Mortal Kombat was didn't get to see all these creative, gory crazy fatalities. There was a cool novelty of, "Oh wow! I see Batman and Sub-Zero on the same screen and they're fighting each other." It was a fun "what if?"

So the game sold well, but it absolutely created this hunger for a tried-and-true, no-holes-barred Mortal Kombat game. And that really set the stage for Mortal Kombat 9. We finished up Mortal Kombat vs. DC literally in the midst of Midway going under, and so we were working on our game and people were leaving. Our building was getting more and more empty. I remember at one point we had a Mortal Kombat team, an NFL Blitz team, Red Card Soccer, and all of the Hangtime, and Showtime, and the basketball games with NBA and even Psi-Ops and Stranglehold and all that stuff. And over the course of a year or so that became smaller and smaller and smaller until it was just us.

So your whole dev team was intact through Midway closing?

Yes. We never laid off a person from our team ever since it was the first four guys. And that was important to us. As you're facing financial challenges, the subject is going come up of, "Well can you guys trim back this? Can you make cuts here?" and with everything that was going on there was an understandable nervousness amongst some of the guys on the team and I personally was insisting on principle, we're not going to let anybody go because this team has been producing and has been doing that. That was a real sticking point. And they were totally understanding.

So Warner Bros. came. Actually a number of other companies were kind of in the running. I remember speaking with a number of companies. But Warner Bros. came and it was clearly the choice. At the time, the first thing they said when we were finishing up Mortal Kombat vs. DC and working on MK9 was, "We want to give you six more months to do this game. We really want to make it as good as it can be." Which was very different from our normal, "Hey it's been two years. Where's the next game?" kind of thing.

So Mortal Kombat 9 was this huge return. It was a return because we had just done a T-rated game. It was a return because we were going back to 2D gameplay. The whole 3D games of Tekken, Virtua Fighter, and Dead or Alive and stuff weren't as strong as they once were. They felt like they had peaked. So we were like, "Now is the

time to really hit." We decided to bring back all the nostalgic characters [from Mortal Kombats] 1, 2, 3. And that was like this crazy grand slam. That was actually the highest-selling of all the Mortal Kombat games almost 20 years later, which was crazy. Usually the first few of a versions of a game are the highest-selling ones. So that was crazy and Warner Bros. really backed us.

On that note, when I talk to developers that kind of reset like you guys did, they always say that's the last option they think about. Were there some other directions you were considering taking before you settled on going back to 2D and all that?

No. To me, I used to use the term "The planets were aligned." It was a perfect setup. Perfect storm of MK vs. DC being such a departure as far as the different characters and the T-rated game, and so much of the feedback was, "Ok that was fun but you're doing a true Mortal Kombat game next, right?" That was the definitive message we heard from players, and so it wasn't even a choice. I used to, in pitches and stuff for this game, I said the story of this game is just the story of going back to 2D, M-rated game, returning characters, retelling the MK1, 2, 3 story. I don't think that setup would ever happen again in terms of the hunger for it.

Once we got the word out of that's what we were doing, it became really crazy. MK vs. DC had introduced that whole cinematic presentation of our story mode, where you go in and

out of the fights, and we really felt like we could perfect that with Mortal Kombat 9. So again, that was another big home run for a big feature that everybody loved. And that was the first Warner Bros. game, Mortal Kombat 9. MK vs. DC was the last Midway one. We did MK vs. DC with the building just slowly being less and less occupied every week. It was weird.

So with Mortal Kombat 9, something that you guys also seemed to focus on was having some of the guest characters. How did that stuff come about?

So we knew we were going to do DLC characters for Mortal Kombat, and since Warner Bros. is a huge entertainment company and you have access to a number of different… they're very collaborative. Like TV and movies and video games. Stuff like that. So that just kind of gave us access to some of these characters through whatever business deals they did. Then it was again, scratching a little bit of that itch of, "Oh wow! Freddy Krueger is on the screen with Scorpion. How cool is that?" We draw a lot of inspirations from some of the horror movies and the Nightmare on Elm Street games. The Nightmare on Elm Street movies come up in a lot of our meetings for fatalities. "Oh remember in that movie when they did that?"

Take me through that process quick. Are you just sending an email to someone at Warner? Like, "Hey can we add Freddy Krueger to the

Injustice: Gods Among Us

game?" And then does it go to legal? What is that like?

It was more like, "We'd love to do a guest character, who's available?" And then we would see a list of 10, 15 characters. We didn't want to do another DC character because we were an M-rated game. I remember they brought up Neo. So there were a whole bunch of ones that were for business reasons or that creatively we didn't think they'd fit. After further discussion, we kind of realized that the horror characters tend to lend themselves to it. Jason, Freddy, Leatherface. So a number of those characters too had come up in our discussions with Mortal Kombat 9, but for whatever reason we chose to do Freddy.

So what prompted the change in direction for Mortal Kombat X? X feels like the game that has had the most new characters since 4. Were you guys at all cautious about going too far into this new direction?

It was a conscious decision. You're right. I think it was the most new characters that we've added almost ever. It was the exact opposite of Mortal Kombat 9 strategy-wise, because we felt like MK 9 was like this homage to the first three games. We literally told the story of the first three over again with our cooler, more cinematic presentation. We didn't introduce new characters. It was Kabal, Stryker, Raiden, and everybody all coming back and it scratched the itch of nostalgia.

After that, we felt it was time to do the opposite. It was like "Now this game, MK X, is all about new." It's all about a bunch of new characters. We're obviously going to have Scorpion, Sub-Zero, the staple characters, but let's really introduce a lot of new elements to it and that was the character variation system, Brutalities, and all these new characters and a brand-new storyline and everything. So we really felt like it was time to kind of like, just like Mortal Kombat 9, it was time for a return to the roots. Mortal Kombat X was time for newness. New novelty. New features. New everything.

I can't think of another game developer who has been on a series as long as you have for Mortal Kombat. What is it about this series that has the staying power for you as a creative talent? Like what do find about this that every day you get up and go in and are excited to make a new game?

I've always been of the opinion that if we don't change something dramatically with each iteration, that's when people start feeling like they've already played the game. As a huge fan of other fighting games, I've seen other fighting game series kind of dwindle down a bit just because they just put

prettier graphics on an existing engine that has been around for 10, 15 years or something. That'll work for a while, but after a while but people just kind of like, "Yeah I can rent this one." As long as we're doing something new and adding something dramatically different, it's still cool to me. At the same time, it's always fun to do new stuff like Injustice and Injustice 2 where we're able to kind of explore a different type of fighting mechanic and different types of characters, presentation, etc.

Take us back to those discussions on getting Injustice off the floor.

When we joined Warner Bros., DC was a part of Warner Bros., so that was a nice kind of coincidence. And DC was going under some changes and whatnot too, so it was different people that we were dealing with. So DC was happy with MK vs. DC and we saw two opportunities with MK vs. DC. One was Mortal Kombat going back to its roots and another game that just celebrates the super hero experience. And that's what Injustice was.

We actually knew we were going to do Injustice while we were working on Mortal Kombat 9 because to me, it was such an obvious next step to do. You do Mortal Kombat vs. DC and then you go, "Ok let's do a pure Mortal Kombat game and let's do a pure super hero, battle-of-the-gods fighting game." And that's when we introduced the bigger scope of fighting where you have multiple arenas and the big transitions and the super moves and all that stuff. So it was really just kind of like a 10 out of 10 Mortal Kombat experience in terms of it's purely Mortal Kombat and then follow that up with a pure super hero experience. In our eyes, we were just like, "Yeah this is obviously the next thing we should do after Mortal Kombat 9."

Obviously comic book companies have their own set of rules with their characters, they're very protective of them. What kind of exchanges of ideas was there in creating this stuff? Because you guys are known for uber-violence, smashing characters through walls. All that kind of stuff. What kind of leeway did they give you in making a super hero game for them?

Injustice was kind of like our first interaction with the Geoff Johns-era and the guys at DC who worked around him. He was just becoming the Chief Creative Officer, I believe. I don't know what the exact timing was, but he was the guy who we were talking with. He was surprisingly open to new ideas. So we're doing all these things. We're slamming cars on people and doing all this stuff and he was really like, "As long as you're staying true to these characters." There wasn't a, "well this

boot should be a little bit higher on his calf." There was none of that. I have a ton of respect for him. It was a very different experience than doing Mortal Kombat vs. DC.

Obviously after the first Injustice, after the success of it, lightning struck twice for you guys. The sequel was a no-brainer. You guys haven't talked too much about the narrative of Injustice 2 yet. Can you go into that a little bit, of building off the lore from the first game?

Well we actually do have a big campaign. We're going to drop a really cool piece of content. Then we're going to unravel the story of that. So I can't really get into a lot of the details of it now. What can I say that doesn't ruin it? It certainly continues with the story and, as you can tell from the roster, there's a lot more characters that are introduced. I've already said this at Comic-Con, that Supergirl plays a very pivotal role moving forward. I feeling like I'm holding back so much.

[Laughs] I understand. But it will be continuing what is there to a degree.

Oh yeah. And the story that we have is, the presentation, is more elaborate as far as the story and options and stuff like that as far as what could happen. It's not as black and white as the first one.

Here you are working on Injustice 2 coming out next year, 30 years since you started in the industry, when you look back on it all, what's the first thing you think?

Looking back, it doesn't feel like 30 years. I went to thing called Pinball Expo this last weekend. They do it every October in Chicago, and I always go to it. I always meet up with friends that I was working on games with when I was doing pinball machines, and everybody is always saying, "Oh my god, look how young we look here! Look at how old we are now!" The thing that keeps popping into my head is it does not feel like 30 years. It doesn't feel like that amount of time has passed. I guess it's odd, but as far as Mortal Kombat is concerned, 25 years, oddly MK X is going to outsell Mortal Kombat 9, which is even crazier. I feel fortunate just to have been part of that whole wave. The highs and lows and everything. Just like to be at this point now where we are is just is amazing. It does not feel like 30 years.

Awesome. Well I think that's it. Ed, you do look the same age from when I first met you. Just your hair is shorter.

[Laughs]. ◈

by Ben Reeves

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

GAME INFORMER'S 4K TV ROUNDUP

1 Sony 55-inch X930D

Sony's pencil-thin display is perfect for mounting, but you'll have to find something to do with the massive external power brick that helped Sony make this TV so thin. Thankfully, everything you display on Sony's screen looks just as good as the unit itself. Games like Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor and Uncharted 4: A Thief's End looked better than ever thanks to Sony's high contrast levels and rich blacks. The X930D also had the best viewing range of any of the TVs we tested, retaining a clear picture even at an extreme angle. While Sony's remote looks a bit old school, we loved the feel of its rubberized buttons, and the remote's internal microphone allows for voice search, which comes in useful while navigating the Android-based OS. This might be the most expensive TV we tested, but it's worth every penny.

SUPERB

$1,599 | *sony.com*

2 Vizio 65-inch SmartCast M-Series

Vizio's outer shell might look a little generic, but the display manages to keep up with Sony and Samsung's offerings. High-dynamic range lighting and automatic dimming help ensure that the SmartCast's colors looks great in any light. Vizio's remote is actually a six-inch Android-powered tablet that comes with a slick-looking magnetic charging station. This remote also takes advantage of Google Cast system, which offers just about every smart-TV app under the sun. It's hard to complain about Vizio's TV, which offers incredible picture quality. Unfortunately, Sony's set has a better design and viewing angle for only $100 more.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■□

$1,499 | *vizio.com*

3 Samsung 55-inch KS8500

The curve to Samsung's 8 Series TVs adds an extra level of elegance to an already great 4K image. A super-small bezel helps Samsung's display stretch from corner to corner, and look great in any room even when powered off. The image itself offers a stunning array of colors thanks to HDR. Samsung's built-in software is an elegant way to access streaming services like YouTube and Netflix, and was easier to use than most of the other TVs we tested. The KS8500's packed in remote is as sleek and stylish as the TV itself and doubles as a universal remote. Unfortunately, viewers sitting on the far end of the screen lose a little clarity in the corner thanks to the curve, but if you're sitting dead on with the screen, this is a great TV for the price.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■□□

$1,199 | *samsung.com*

4 Hisense 50-inch H8 Series

You get what you pay for with this tv. The display looks good, and features deep blacks. Unfortunately, H8 Series' range of colors isn't nearly as breathtaking as many of the other TVs we tested. Hisense's Linux-based interface is also a little clunky and confusing to navigate, and is missing some important streaming services, like Crunchyroll, ESPN, and Hulu. Hisense's 4K TV produces a decent picture, and has a tempting price, but comes up short compared to other high-end displays.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■□□□

$449 | *hisense-usa.com*

PlayStation 4 Pro

From a glance, Sony's new PlayStation 4 Pro implies a significant upgrade. The console is roughly the same size as the original PlayStation 4 hardware, but the altered triple–decker design makes it look like a bigger machine, almost like two PlayStation 4s were mashed together into one.

by Andrew Reiner

Looks can be deceiving, however. PlayStation 4 Pro is not the next evolution of Sony's long-running console; it's a moderate upgrade designed mostly for people investing in 4K displays who want their games to take advantage of that new technology.

The Pro is a nice looking device, but it sticks to the conventions Sony established with the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 4 S.

The new hardware is an inch longer and wider than its predecessor and has the same black matte finish, but no longer a glossy racing stripe on top. The LED light that visually shows the system is booting up or is on has moved to the lower groove on the front of the unit. Sony also added a USB 3.0 port to the backside. The power supply is once again buried within the hardware, but the AC power cord is of a different, thicker design, meaning you won't be able to simply use your previous PlayStation 4's power cable to turn on this new device. The launch edition is equipped with a 1TB hard drive. Due to encryption issues, the internal hard drive from PlayStation 4 cannot be swapped into the Pro, but other internal solid-state drives can be used.

When the Pro boots up, you won't notice anything different, other than a sharper and more vibrant version of the current PlayStation 4 dash, running at a true 3840x2160 resolution with either 2K or 4K HDR (depending on what your TV supports). The hardware allows for more powerful gaming experiences, with more than double the GPU power and a higher clock rate for the CPU, but the mileage varies for each game. Some developers are offering patches to take advantage of the Pro's increased performance, but others aren't enhancing their games at all. All existing PlayStation 4 titles (and all that will be released in the future) are compatible with Pro.

Sony announced that more than 30 games are optimized for Pro's launch on November 10, and over 45 will be available by the end of the year. This may not sound like much, but when compared to the library available for Xbox One S, Microsoft's 4K/HDR equivalent to Pro, it shows developers and publishers are pledging significantly more support to Sony's alternative. The Xbox One S library consists of just five games with HDR/4K upgrades, and another three announced titles are on the way in 2017. When it comes to game performance enhanced for 4K displays, the Pro is the easy choice. It blows the Xbox One S out of the

water. That said, Microsoft's forthcoming Scorpio console (due in 2017) could flip the scale again.

The selection of Pro-ready games at launch ranges from new releases like Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare and Battlefield 1 to a wide selection of older titles like Infamous First Light and The Last of Us Remastered. Again, the enhancements offered are different for each game. Some deliver visual upgrades, others up the performance with smoother framerates and reduced load times. The developer determines how to take advantage of the hardware. All too often, the available upgrades are not listed for each game; you won't know how they are enhanced on Pro. A few titles I checked out offer options, such as Infamous: Second Son adding an option for HDR rendering (on or off), along with Framerate (unlimited or locked at 30), and performance (higher resolution or better framerate).

I took a handful of Pro launch titles for a test drive, and walked away impressed by how much the 4K upscaling enhances the look of games. Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor and Rise of the Tomb Raider are the perfect examples of old games that look new again on the Pro. Super-sampling anti-aliasing is used to bring out the minute details in the character models and worlds. They look fantastic, but in Mordor, players are frequently reminded of the past when prerendered cutscenes play at a much lower resolution and look significantly worse than the newly enhanced in-game graphics.

Infamous: Second Son is another game that makes good use of the Pro technology with a sizable 3.6GB patch that enhances the look of the game. Infamous: Second Son has always been colorful, but the vibrancy of the world leaps off of the screen on Sony's new hardware, with lighting for both day and night cycles, clarity of detail on distant items, and small texture touches on buildings and signs. I used the game's photo mode to compare a snapshot on a 1080p TV without the patch and a 4K display with it, and while both are beautiful, small visual differences are everywhere. This is one

game where the eight million pixels of a 4K display (1080p TVs range from between one or two million) are taken advantage of.

PlayStation Pro is best used on 4K displays, but also delivers HDR support (also available on standard PlayStation 4 models) and performance enhancements and for 1080p TVs. Don't expect these differences to be overtly noticeable, as they may just enhance color ranges or framerate bumps. Regardless, the Pro does make games better on standard TVs.

That begs the question: Is Pro worth the money? If you have a 4K TV and often find yourself marveling at graphical details in games (be it landscapes on the horizon or the detail on a character's face), the answer is a resounding "yes." If you don't care about that stuff too much, there's no need to upgrade, but I would keep an eye on how performance is altered for your favorite games. A better framerate

or reduced loading times in a favorite title may be enough of a selling point for some.

Now here's the bad news: While the PlayStation 4 Pro offers 4K support for popular multimedia apps like Netflix and YouTube, it isn't equipped with an Ultra HD Blu-Ray player, the new disc-based standard for 4K movie watching. As of this June, Variety reported UHD disc sales were growing four times faster than Blu-Ray at its launch a decade ago. Not having a UHD player is a glaring omission from Sony, a company that has always embraced the latest in technology – from CD in the PlayStation, DVD in PlayStation 2, and Blu-Ray in PlayStation 3. Remember, the PlayStation 3 didn't just sell for games; it was one of the best deals for Blu-Ray players on the market at the time.

Sony clearly thinks people will likely get their movies through digital formats, and that there may

not be a physical market for them in the years ahead. It's a gamble that could end up hurting the Pro. Microsoft equipped the Xbox One S with UHD, making it the more complete machine for movies and TV.

Neither the PS4 Pro or Xbox One S delivers a full 4K experience, and both have their own advantages and weaknesses. Pro is, however, the better option for games, and it looks like it is getting the support from developers and publishers to make it a sound investment if you greatly appreciate visuals in games. I have to stress the "greatly" here, as the enhancements, while apparent, are not a generational leap. In the larger picture, the PS4 Pro is a small step forward. It's a nice step for people who have embraced the latest and greatest in display technology, but isn't a difference maker in the world of games.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$399 | *playstation.com*

NES Classic Edition

N intendo has never been shy about targeting its fans' nostalgia, but the NES Classic Edition takes this approach to a new level. That's not necessarily a problem; with a cute, compact design that mimics the look of the original Nintendo Entertainment System, this new plug–and–play console lets you relive the glory (and many of the inconveniences) of the 8–bit era.

by Joe Juba

I spent several hours playing around with the NES Classic Edition, jumping between games, checking out different features, and unearthing long-lost muscle memories from my childhood. It was fun, but as someone who was really looking forward to this gadget, I'm a bit disappointed.

The box includes everything you need to get set up. The system (pre-loaded with 30 games – see sidebar), one controller, an HDMI cable, and a USB power cable. It's all easy to assemble: You plug it in, hook up the HDMI, press power, and you're good to go. No accounts to set up, and no wi-fi to connect to. It is an offline, stand-alone system.

Of the 30 games, 16 support some sort of two-player component. You obviously need two controllers for the simultaneous two-player games. However, even for the titles that alternate, you can't just pass back and forth. If you only have one controller, you need to unplug it and manually swap ports when it's the other player's turn. So you basically need a second controller if you plan on doing any multiplayer at all. The NES Classic version controller costs $10, but if you don't care about the classic aesthetic, you can use the Wii Classic Controller or Classic Controller Pro.

Hands-down, the best part of the deal is the collection of games. I certainly have my favorites, but every game is timeless and iconic – not to mention fun.

Yes, you can relive your favorite games through the Virtual Console on other Nintendo consoles, but having them all in one accessible and intuitive place works great.

I also like the three different display options. One replicates the fuzziness of a CRT television, one is a crisp 4:3 display, and the last is "pixel perfect," which makes each pixel a perfect square (rather than the slightly rectangular pixels in 4:3). I switched among all three modes regularly, and none of them offer any clear advantages beyond personal preference.

If the games are good, nothing else really matters, right? Well, a weird amount of your ability to enjoy the NES Classic Edition relies on your proximity to the console itself. You can't just set it up

behind the glass of your entertainment center, then sit back on your couch and settle in for a long play session; the controller cord is too short. It's just 30 inches, and you can't sync it up to any wireless options, so you're tethered to the system and can't stray more than 2.5 feet from it.

Once you start a game, you can't get back to the game selection screen without hitting reset. This is odd, since part of the appeal is hopping from one title to another. The reset button also controls your save states, which is a hassle. When you hit reset and return to the menu, the system creates a suspended state of your game that you can lock in and access later. Save states are among the few modern amenities included, and I wish Nintendo had figured out a more natural way to implement them.

There are ways to recapture nostalgia without simultaneously bringing forward the annoyances of being huddled on the floor in front of your TV. Maybe Nintendo did this to preserve the sense of playing the original NES in the '80s, but it gets in the way of letting players appreciate the vast selection of great games. Swapping ports for two-player (if you only have one controller), dealing with restrictive cord length, and hitting the reset button to reach the main menu are frustrations that just feel unnecessary. However, under the right conditions – sitting at a desk close to a monitor with the console within arm's reach – the NES Classic Edition lets you take an entertaining and rewarding trip down memory lane. 🔥

LIMITED APPEAL 🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜

$59.99 | *nintendo.com/nes-classic*

The Games
- Balloon Fight
- Bubble Bobble
- Castlevania
- Castlevania II: Simon's Quest
- Donkey Kong
- Donkey Kong Jr.
- Double Dragon II: The Revenge
- Dr. Mario
- Excitebike
- Final Fantasy
- Galaga
- Ghosts'N Goblins
- Gradius
- Ice Climber
- Kid Icarus
- Kirby's Adventure
- Mario Bros.
- Mega Man 2
- Metroid
- Ninja Gaiden
- Pac-Man
- Punch-Out!! Featuring Mr. Dream
- StarTropics
- Super C
- Super Mario Bros.
- Super Mario Bros. 2
- Super Mario Bros. 3
- Tecmo Bowl
- The Legend of Zelda
- Zelda II: The Adventure of Link

Media Shelf

What We Don't Know About Nintendo Switch Could Hurt It

by Matthew Kato, Senior Editor

Gamers are intrigued and excited by Nintendo's Switch console. The system lets you play at home on your TV and then take that experience outside without missing a beat. While that top-line functionality has garnered interest, we still don't know a lot about the Switch. One thing that is clear from the system's initial reveal trailer is that so far Nintendo is targeting core gamers. There are no kids or grandparents – it showcases people who already like playing games digging into titles like Skyrim and an NBA title. Esports are even referenced! That's a good start, but as a core gamer, I need questions answered about the system above and beyond its basic functionality before I can get truly excited about the system. I need to know that the system is really designed for me.

The debut trailer for the Switch shows off people playing multiplayer out in the wild, but the short clip offered more questions than answers about what direction Nintendo is taking with competitive play. More than one person can play on a single screen, but this requires players to separate the Joy-Con controllers from the side of the screen. These controllers are then held sideways, but doing so not only means you're gripping a small section of the Joy-Con, but you also have fewer buttons at your disposal. Each section – when connected to the Switch's screen – has a bumper and trigger, but when you hold the section sideways (which you have to do when it's removed from the screen for multiplayer) the bumper and trigger become hard, if not impossible to access. Playing a shooter, sports game, or anything that relies on a decent number of inputs will be handicapped once you're playing multiplayer on a single Switch screen.

That's not the only multiplayer question that Nintendo has to answer about the console. In an age when online modes are pervasive and increasingly complex, the company must improve its online infrastructure to introduce easy party building and voice chat in order to keep up with the standards set by Sony and Microsoft.

Software is all-important for any system, and I also need to know the experience I am getting on the Switch is on par with what I get on other systems, from feature sets to gameplay. Otherwise, it's an inferior experience. If that's the case, then being able to play a substandard title outside of my home is no consolation. Nintendo keeps saying they're working with third-parties, but historically this important part of a system's software equation has been lacking for Nintendo's consoles. Not only do third-party games for the Switch need to have the same features as those appearing on other systems, they also have to come out at the same time. If this happens, and then the console adds its own twist, then you'll have something that's actually a special experience. This will create some excitement among core gamers, retain it, and create a relationship with consumers that ensures third-parties don't withdraw support from the Switch like they normally do with Nintendo systems.

We're a few months away from the console's release, and with these questions up in the air, there's too much that's unknown – a situation that tempers excitement. This is similar to the Wii U in some ways. When Nintendo unveiled the Wii U at E3 2011, people didn't even know if the GamePad was the actual console or just the controller. It took time for the public to fully understand what the Wii U was about. If a similar situation happens before the Switch's March release, the confusion won't be good for the system's launch.

Had Nintendo run a more traditional announcement and release timeframe, the Switch could have used previous E3 conventions in early summer to get its message out, taken feedback, and make any adjustments. That time can prove valuable – remember the herculean job Microsoft had to reverse course from the original vision for the Xbox One? But by shorting consumers on information not releasing in the traditional Christmas timeframe, the Switch has missed on the holiday blockbusters and even the fall slate of sports games that are commonly featured in launch libraries. I'm certainly not going to buy them twice just so I can play them in the park.
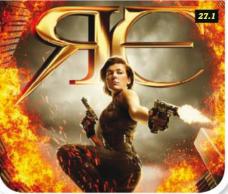
The Switch could be a return to a core gamer-focused system from Nintendo, the likes of which we haven't for two generations. But in the absence of a full explanation of its functionality and what kinds of software experiences it hosts the console feels like a big question mark like the Wii U before it. The lack of information right now may not doom the console, but Nintendo hasn't given consumers enough of a reason yet not to think it might. ◆

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

01.1

20.1 Gravity Rush 2

24 Resident Evil 7 Biohazard

24 Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue

27.1

30 Hitman: The Complete First Season

2017

January

01.1 Marvel's Monsters Unleashed
Who would win in a fight: Thor or Godzilla? We may never know the answer to this exact matchup, but Marvel's newest limited series *Monsters Unleashed* shows us what happens when Marvel's heroes take on a new Godzilla-sized threat called the Leviathons. These beasts want to destroy Earth, and it's going to take the collective might of all of the heroes and villains to stop them. Who controls the Leviathons? You'll need to read the first issue, out today, to find out!

01.2 The Mick
It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia fans, take note: FOX's new show, *The Mick*, starts tonight and stars Kaitlin Olson (Sweet Dee) as a two-bit hustler named Mackenzie who is tasked to raise three children, but has no intentions of doing that well. This single-camera show is spearheaded by *Always Sunny*'s John and Dave Chernin.

05 CES 2017
The latest breakthroughs in technology are on display at this year's Consumer Electronic Show, running January 5-8 in Las Vegas. Early hints point at virtual reality, self-driving cars, and artificial intelligence being big components of this year's show. We also expect to see television companies introduce cheaper 4K displays.

15 New Releases
› Atelier Shallie Plus: Alchemists of the Dusk Sea *(PS4)*
› Road Redemption *(PS4, Xbox One)*

20.1 New Releases
› Gravity Rush 2 *(PS4)*
› Urban Empire *(PC)*

20.2 xXx: Return Of Xander Cage
A sequel 15 years in the making, *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* opens in theaters today. Vin Diesel reprises his role of a lone-gun for hire who uses extreme sports techniques to save the world. No, we are not making that last part up. In this sequel you'll see how a motorcycle can be used as a surfboard, and how jungles are perfect for parkour.

20.3 Global Game Jam 2017
In the span of 48 hours, thousands of small development teams are tasked to design, develop, and test a new game. Last year's Global Game Jam saw over 600 teams in 93 countries make 6,866 games in two days. If you're interested in making your own game, visit globalgamejam.org to join the fun.

24 New Releases
› Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue *(PS4)*
› Resident Evil 7 Biohazard *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Splasher *(PS4)*
› Tales of Berseria *(PS4, PC)*
› Yakuza 0 *(PS4)*

27.1 Resident Evil: The Final Chapter
You may be at home playing Resident Evil 7 Biohazard this weekend, but another Resident Evil story can be experienced in theaters today. Milla Jovovich is back for one last time in *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*. The world is mostly in ruin, but Jovovich's Alice is still fighting to save what's left of it. Her latest breakthrough brings her back to Raccoon City. This sequel is once again written and directed by Paul W. S. Anderson.

27.2 New Releases
› Syndrome *(PS4)*

27.3 PAX South 2017
Games. Panels. Cosplay. PAX South returns to San Antonio, Texas today, and runs through the weekend. This show is usually light on game news, but is a great place for gamers to meet up, especially if you want to spend the weekend playing board games, as PAX South is home to a huge indie tabletop showcase.

30 New Releases
› Constructor HD *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Disgaea 2 *(PC)*
› Hitman: The Complete First Season *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)* ◈

CONTAINED, BUT NOT TAMED

Talos I has fallen. Its lunar orbit is secure, but the station – essentially a Russian nesting doll built around unspeakable horror – has been overrun by the threat it was designed to contain. Governments tried and failed to learn from the captive aliens, abandoning post when the stakes became too bloody. A corporation showed more resolve, extracting technological wonders from the creatures. And now, a reckoning. With the station's crew mostly dead, how will you survive? Will you show this alien threat how humanity fights back? Or will you turn their strange essence against them, even if it means losing part of yourself in the process? You may not have chosen to be here, but what you do next is up to you.

by Jeff Cork

Since its first game, 2002's Arx Fatalis, Arkane Studios has gravitated toward specific types of experiences, even as its games have taken players through fantasy, steampunk, and sci-fi worlds. These kinds of games don't have a catchy name, or a genre that tidily sums them up. But, to paraphrase that old saying, you know them when you see them. Arkane's Dishonored series is a well-known example of these experiences, which are built on a variety of interconnected gameplay systems that put a premium on player choice and experimentation. Talk to any of the developers at the studio's Austin, Texas, office, and it's easy to see genuine enthusiasm.

Telepaths control human victims, turning them against Morgan and other survivors. Beware

"I would not have as much fun working on a game that did not have overlapping, interlocking systems," says lead designer Ricardo Bare. "I love two things about games, probably more than anything else. One is I love being transported somewhere else that I've never been before. A game that does a really good job of putting you in another universe and has interesting characters and invites me into this world that I've never been to before. The second thing is just the sensation of anything is possible. When a game achieves that, it feels sublime to me. I try this thing, I combine this with this, and, 'Oh my god, it worked! Yes!' That to me is magical. And that's what we try to do."

The name Prey will likely seem familiar to you, but this game has nothing to do with Human Head's games – either the first game that came out a decade ago, or the planned sequel Bethesda scrapped during its development. Instead, it was based on an idea Arkane had been kicking around for a while, and Bethesda played matchmaker to an existing IP. (For more on the Prey name, see sidebar on page 57.)

Arkane's Prey started with a simple setup, according to creative director and studio president Raphael Colantonio. "We wanted to do something where you're trapped in an environment – it could have been a mall, it could have been anything, and a space station came up." Once those early conversations gelled into a more solid idea, the rest of Talos I's world slid into place. That setting proved to be a great fit for the project, partially because of the creative freedom that accompanied its inherent constraints. "The thing about enclosed worlds is that you can craft them much, much more, because their size scales to you," Colantonio says. "Every room is very important, every object matters, which is harder to do in a huge environment where things are more generic, and you're copying and pasting things."

That sense of crafting is evident in the game. Talos I has a fascinating history, built in layers that span several eras. During a short walk you might soak in the atmosphere of a lush artificial park, and then enjoy the stately grandeur of an Art Deco-inspired lobby. Pass through a few doors – some of which you may not technically be authorized to open – and you may see the gold foil and white, quilted insulation from the height of the space-age '60s.

"It's a joint effort on the design side of things and the art side of things, because both departments feed into each other," Bare says. "They'll say something that gives us an idea, we'll say something that gives them an idea, and it's this cool cycle. It's so that the world feels believable and coherent and that it informs all of the changes that happen downstream or the decisions that happen downstream."

Talos I contains plenty of sights and secrets, but talking about them will only get us so far. It's time to enter the broken world of Prey and learn more about what happened – and what we'll do next. One last thing: Players can choose between male and female versions of the protagonist, Morgan Yu. In our demo, the version of Yu we saw was male, which is why we're using the male pronoun throughout.

PROBING THE GUTS

We begin the demo several hours into the game, on a journey heading toward the station's arboretum. We don't know why exactly we're going there – Arkane is being cagey about revealing too many story elements at this stage – but we do know the trip isn't going to be easy. Yu must navigate through the station's back end. Since the corporation has taken control of the station from the government agencies that built it, TranStar has expanded Talos I and created a luxurious temporary home for its employees. Arkane peels back that veneer and invites the player to push through its inner workings in a section of the station known as the GUTS.
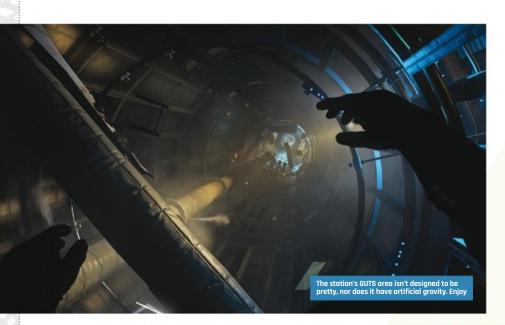
GUTS – or Gravity Utility Tunnel System – is a broad term for the spaces behind the station's walls, essentially its circulatory system. It's one of the few areas in the ship that isn't affected by artificial gravity, and the floating motion lends an eerie quality to exploration. Yu guides himself along using a propulsion system, drifting past crates, sparking wreckage, and other debris. The huge, cylindrical passageway is blanketed with white insulation, with catwalks and girders lining the sides along with a complicated-looking network of pipes.

"It's basically like a backdoor, secret-tunnel sort of way to navigate the space station," Bare says. "Typically, the way people would navigate the space station is by using the main lift, but early on in the game the lift is broken." According to January, a mysterious figure on our communications system, going through GUTS is going to have to suffice for the time being. Arkane wouldn't say much about January, answering most of our questions with cryptic chuckles. This person is one of several different figures Yu encounters, all with their own agenda.

Yu isn't alone, either. The tunnels are home to small creatures known as Cystoids, which slowly pass by in the distance. The station has been overrun by an alien force collectively named the Typhon, ranging from these primitive creatures to things that are far more cunning. These particular low-level aliens resemble beach balls in size and shape. Bare says they're similar to fish in terms of their overall sophistication. Unlike some of the more intelligent Typhon aboard Talos I, these have a single-minded purpose: follow motion and then explode. They're hatched from shimmering black clusters of nests, and their density makes them impossible to ignore. The first thing to do is to probably get a better understanding of what we're up against.

Bare activates a device called a Psychoscope to get a better look at it. "The Psychoscope is a key item in the game," Bare says. "You find it about two hours in, and it's something that was developed here on the space station to study the Typhon material – the aliens." This head-mounted device lets players scan environments through its single lens and gain valuable intel on the Typhon threat, such as their weaknesses or their

The station's GUTS area isn't designed to be pretty, nor does it have artificial gravity. Enjoy

WHO ARE YU?

In Prey, players take on the role of Morgan Yu, the key subject in an experiment to change humanity forever. You awake on Talos I, a space station orbiting the moon. An alien species called the Typhon has taken over, and it's up to you to figure out what to do next.

"You're connected to Talos and TranStar in a very intimate way that you discover pretty soon after you wake up," says lead designer Ricardo Bare. We know that Yu's father was a Chinese neuroscientist and his mother was a German tech entrepreneur.

At the beginning of the game, you can select between a male or female version of Yu. "It's not like, 'Oh my gosh, the ending is different because I chose a male instead of a female,' but it does have some impact," Bare says. "It's largely cosmetic, but it does affect some things." For example, some characters may react differently to you depending on your gender, though, as with most story-related topics, Arkane didn't want to go much deeper than that.

You can look at the security rosters to find the whereabouts of the former crew, and track them down if you want

special abilities. Scanned enemies are then marked, making them easier to track in the world. It also has a deeper purpose, which we'll get into a little later.

The Psychoscope's zoomed-in view gives us a better look at the Cystoids and their nests, but seeing them closer actually adds to the confusion. Even for aliens, they don't appear to be ordinary beings made of flesh and sinew. Instead, there's a smoky, ethereal quality that makes them seem cloaked in a dark fog. That, of course, was by design.

"From the get-go we wanted some aliens that were hard to grasp, a little on the paranormal side of things, not as physical," Colantonio says. They are at least partially physical, he adds, but there is an extradimensional element to the Typhon.

The Cystoids have easily recognizable roundish, dark profiles, but we'll have to gawk more some other time. Our drifting motion has alerted a few of the creatures, and they start to head our way. Yu pulls out a silenced pistol and pops a few before they have time to get too close. In zero G, they bob and dart in the weightlessness, but in the station's ordinary gravity Bare says they roll at players like a carpet of swarming soccer balls.

One of Yu's shots misses, puncturing a pipe and creating a small jet of flame. A nearby nest churns out several Cystoids, which investigate the flame's motion. They may not be traditionally smart, as evidenced by seeing them get roasted in the fire, but they do serve

a purpose: The Typhon place these nests where they want a replenishing minefield. Yu can take out the nests in a variety of ways, such as hurling debris at it, blasting it apart with a weapon, or using one of Yu's special Psi abilities. You see, there's more to Yu than meets the eye. But first, a brief history lesson.
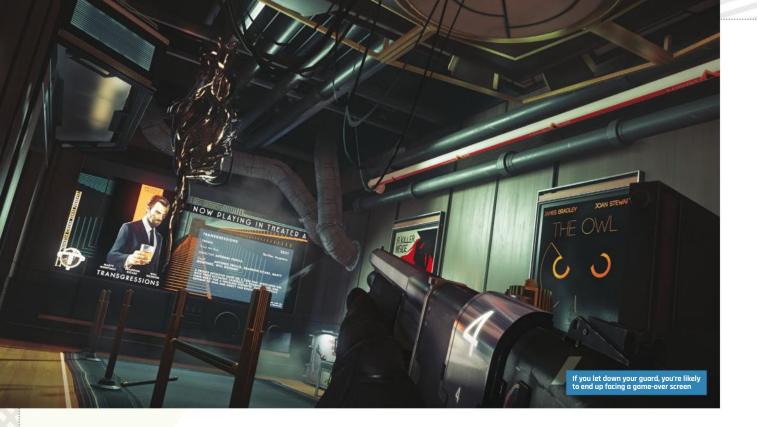
HOW WE GOT HERE
In the late 1950s, the United States and Soviet Union were embroiled in the space race. Both nations looked toward the stars and saw their future, but the Soviets got there first with the Sputnik satellite. Here's where actual history breaks away from Prey's vision of the past and future. In 1958, the Soviet Verona I satellite was knocked out of service during its lunar orbit. The Soviets investigated with a manned space mission, and the Cosmonauts encountered the source of the malfunction: aliens we now know as the Typhon. The creatures overwhelmed and killed the men, but video of the encounter was recorded. A panicked Nikita Khrushchev approached rival President John F. Kennedy, and the leaders decided to pool their space efforts in the spirit of cooperation – and survival.

The two nations built a containment capsule around the Verona I, a structure known as the Kletka, a Russian word meaning "cage." In November 1963, Kennedy survives a failed assassination attempt. This brush with death invigorates the president, who then devotes more money and manpower into the space program. The U.S. and Soviet Union have a falling out, and the U.S. takes complete control of the Kletka, eventually building a space station around the capsule devoted to researching the creatures.

Don't expect to find missile launchers or other overpowered weapons; this was a functioning space station, and those weapons wouldn't have made sense here

If you let down your guard, you're likely to end up facing a game-over screen

"The space station, over the decades, keeps evolving and getting bigger and bigger and bigger, but they were unsuccessful in actually getting anything useful out of it," Bare says. "Our explanation for it is that what they didn't have then was the neuroscience to really get what made these aliens tick." In 1998, a containment failure took the lives of several scientists aboard the station. The government, rattled by those deaths and disillusioned by the overall lack of scientific progress, shuttered the station indefinitely. TranStar was then founded by former government officials, who privatized the station in 2025, renamed it Talos I, and began expansions and renovations. By then, TranStar had the neuroscience – and the ruthless determination – to finally do something with the Typhon.

In the Dishonored series, players have access to a variety of mystical powers, granted by a strange figure known as The Outsider. Prey features equally fantastic abilities, but they're grounded in the unique sci-fi universe. Here, players don't have a spirit guide helping them reach their potential. Instead, they have brain scans, alien guts, and the will to stab their eyeball with several needles.

TranStar didn't take over the space station out of the kindness of its corporate heart. Thanks to heavy investment in neuroscience, the company made a breakthrough with technology known as Neuromods. These devices change the structure of a patient's brain, manipulating it to grant effects as diverse as learning a foreign language, gaining the ability to play a musical instrument, or even lengthening a person's lifespan. The idea is admittedly far-fetched, but Arkane has thought through how something like that might work in its scientifically advanced future, from the initial poke onward.

"The needles inject a serum that makes the neurons in your brain sensitive to light," Bare says. "Then the next step is that it uses lasers and light to record a map of your brain." From there, the device makes a map of all the neural connections in the user's brain, and then extrapolates what physical changes would take place if the person, say, knew how to speak German. "That's the idea," Bare says. "It goes into the optic nerve and injects this serum that has synthetic neurons and all that it needs to work. All that lore exists. Some of it's in emails and books, and you don't have to know any of that stuff. We need to know that stuff, because we feel that it's important to making the world feel believable."

Neuromods are a luxury on Earth, and only the wealthy can afford to have them installed. They're created from the bodies of the Typhon and shuttled back to Earth on weekly shipments, though the people back home are none the wiser to the actual source. All they know is that they can spend a boatload of cash to live a few extra years.

WHO ARE THE TYPHON?

In Prey's fiction, human history is altered after an encounter with an alien species. These creatures, known as the Typhon, come in many different forms, filling a variety of specialized roles. Here's a quick rundown of some of the threats Morgan Yu faces during his journey through the space station Talos I, based on what we know of the alien ecology.

TELEPATH

These large, tentacle creatures hijack their victims' minds, controlling them and forcing them to attack other people. Tragically, the victim is at least somewhat aware that it's happening, even as they pursue their former friends.

MIMIC

These dog-sized quadrupeds are the first aliens that made contact with Soviet Cosmonauts. They're an integral link to the Typhon ecology, with a single Mimic containing everything the species needs to get a diverse colony up and running. They're capable of imitating nonliving objects.

CYSTOID

Cystoids are attracted to movement, and they will explode upon proximity to the source of the movement. They're hatched from nests, which are often placed in sensitive areas.

WEAVER

Mimics devour the Psi energy from their human hosts by inserting a tentacle down the victim's throat. The deformed remains are called husks. Weavers can reanimate these husks, turning them into Phantoms.

PHANTOM

Phantoms are the foot soldiers of the Typhon, tasked with guarding areas and attacking anyone who comes near. They're bipedal creatures that can move with great speed. They also come in elite forms, which allow them to attack with thermal energy or split into multiple Phantoms as a diversionary tactic.
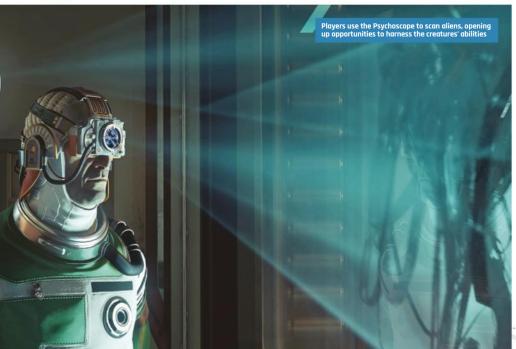
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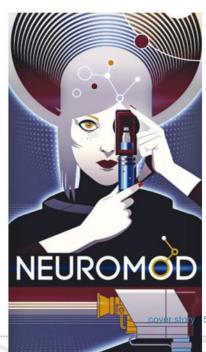
Occasionally, Weavers aren't successful in their attempts to reanimate husks. In these cases, rather than creating a Phantom, the result is a Typhon called a Poltergeist. These lurk out of sight, waiting for the right moment to hurl objects or throw their victims into the air.

NIGHTMARE

The Nightmare is a single entity engineered to go after Morgan Yu, which the Typhon see as an unusually powerful threat. The beast wanders throughout Talos I, searching for its prey. Depending on Yu's actions, the search can become easier, with fatal results.

Players use the Psychoscope to scan aliens, opening up opportunities to harness the creatures' abilities

NEUROMOD

The ships robotic Operators were once a helpful presence. As you might imagine, recent events have taken their toll

THE ENEMY WITHIN

When we last saw Yu, he was in trouble. A Cystoid nest blocked the route between the GUTS and the interior of the station. With the press of a button, Bare entered something called Psi mode to better assess the situation. When activated, time stops, allowing players to strategize and plan their next moves. Time steps forward incrementally as Yu moves, but he can look around without penalty. During this time you can activate some of Yu's special Psi powers. Bare uses Kinetic Blast to send debris at the intended target, which in this case is a nest. The attack succeeds, destroying the nest completely. With the threat gone, Yu moves back inside the station, where even greater threats await.

Walking through a giant set of doors and back into the station proper, Bare points out a blocked door. This being an Arkane game, players have a variety of different ways to approach this obstacle. The obvious way – at least in the world of Prey – would be to use the Mimic ability. This oddball Psi ability taps into the power from a Typhon type of the same name. These quadrupeds have an alarming ability to take on the form of virtually any object aboard the station, attacking unsuspecting passersby who think the chair in the hallway is just a chair, and not a shapeshifting alien. With the Mimic ability, Yu could transform into a small object like a vase or a coffee cup and roll underneath the blockage.

"There's probably an alternate route I could find if I explored," Bare says, "In my playthrough last week, I didn't have any of those powers, I had Kinetic Blast. I was really hurt, and what I did was put a Kinetic Blast behind this MedKit here…" he pauses, showing an impressive bank shot that propels the MedKit through the gap and within Yu's grasp. That kind of emergent gameplay is at the heart of what Arkane does.

"That's why we try to simulate everything," Colantonio says. "We could have made the decision, 'Well, MedKits should not be physics objects, because you don't want to lose them in the world,' but making them physics objects lets you do these sort of things."
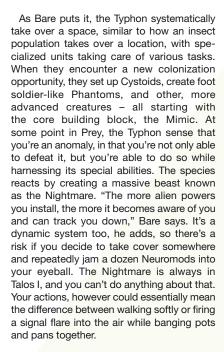
Players can acquire a variety of different Neuromods during Prey, but activating them introduces a bit of a balancing act. Even though the underlying technology itself was derived from alien materials, TranStar has only been selling mods that give people human abilities. Just before the events of the game, the company's scientists took the experiment to the next logical step: giving alien abilities to humans. Yu is the first and only person who has successfully bridged the gap, which means we're seeing something particularly unusual when he blasts a MedKit closer or transforms into a clipboard. There are consequences for using those abilities, too.

Talos I has been fortified with automated turrets, which provide an additional layer of security on the station. "The turrets are there to detect alien material, and they shoot at it," Colantonio says. "However, as you get more and more powers, the turrets start to feel funny about you, and then they start to attack you."

"It's cool because it flips things," Bare says. "At the beginning of the game, when you see a turret you're like, 'Oh, thank god, I'm going to hide behind this turret and maybe pick it up and move it over here to keep these Mimics away from me.' And the turret looks at you and says, 'No Typhon material detected.'" As players install more mods – and that's if they choose to go down that optional route – the turrets will begin to see Yu as a threat. "You start to get a sense of, 'If I just install one more or two more, I'm going to cross the line and then the turrets are going to see me as they see the Mimics and everything else.'" And that's only one of the problems.

Be sure to pick up everything you find; you never know what you might need along the way

As Bare puts it, the Typhon systematically take over a space, similar to how an insect population takes over a location, with specialized units taking care of various tasks. When they encounter a new colonization opportunity, they set up Cystoids, create foot soldier-like Phantoms, and other, more advanced creatures – all starting with the core building block, the Mimic. At some point in Prey, the Typhon sense that you're an anomaly, in that you're not only able to defeat it, but you're able to do so while harnessing its special abilities. The species reacts by creating a massive beast known as the Nightmare. "The more alien powers you install, the more it becomes aware of you and can track you down," Bare says. It's a dynamic system too, he adds, so there's a risk if you decide to take cover somewhere and repeatedly jam a dozen Neuromods into your eyeball. The Nightmare is always in Talos I, and you can't do anything about that. Your actions, however could essentially mean the difference between walking softly or firing a signal flare into the air while banging pots and pans together.

THE PUPPET MASTER

Fortunately for us, we don't have to worry about the Nightmare yet. Bare skips us ahead, where Yu is looking for a way into a section of the station known as Deep Storage. Again, we're not exactly sure why we're going there; context will have to wait.

Talos I is a massive structure, which Bare compares roughly to the size of the Empire State Building. It's designed to be explored, and players have relatively free rein of the place, either through its interior spaces or – for the truly adventurous – by exiting the station and exploring its breached exterior. There is, of course, some backtracking and gating in place. The path to Deep Storage is blocked off by a voice-activated lock. Unfortunately for us, it's not Yu's voice, so we have to do some scrounging around in the station's crew quarters and living spaces. It's a welcome change of scenery from the comparatively drab GUTS, and it shows what life used to be like on Talos I.

"The cool thing about this level is that it is the crew quarters in the space station, so it's the most humanizing space aboard the ship," Bare says. "You get to learn what the people's lives are like and a lot more about the back-stories of some of the characters."

Our waypoint directs us to crew member Danielle Sho's room, the person who originally locked Deep Storage. We must acquire samples of her voice and compile them to crack the lock. Before we do that, another voice attracts our attention, coming from the cafeteria's loudspeakers. "Come closer," it taunts. "Yesssss, a little closer. Stupid puppets."

We detour into the cafeteria and see a crew member – or something that looks like they may have been one at another time. Its shambling animations don't look right, and we realize that something's gone horribly wrong as it staggers toward us. "This guy's actually being mind-controlled by a creature called a Telepath," Colantonio says. "If they see you, they will try to attack you." Yu is equipped with several ways to deal with this new threat, but we want to choose carefully; how we respond has larger consequences throughout the game.

The easiest option would be to kill the mind-controlled victim, but that seems rash. We could also avoid the human puppet and track down the Telepath controlling him. By defeating that Typhon, it frees any of the humans under its control. Instead, we use a stun gun we looted from a nearby corpse, temporarily incapacitating the person.

Inching deeper into the cafeteria, we spy the Telepath. Even for a Typhon it's a weird-looking being. It's a large, tumorous mass floating above the ground with tentacles dragging below it. Whatever thrall it holds on its victims must not be based on charisma. Bare pauses for a moment and looks around. It's not the kind of cafeteria you might find in a college or hospital. TranStar is a wealthy corporation, and it works hard to surround its employees with the comforts of home. Stone pillars flank a dramatic staircase, and wood paneling abounds.

The Telepath is near the stairs, and we approach from behind. Still unseen, Yu pulls out his GLOO Cannon, spraying the creature with a dense layer of thickening riot foam. The Telepath collapses to the ground, giving Bare a moment to pull up his Psychoscope and scan the creature for data. Moments later, the Telepath breaks free, and it's none too pleased by this incursion. It attacks, firing projectiles our way. One hits, causing physical damage and also temporarily preventing us from using our own Psi abilities.

Yu retreats behind the staircase, with the Telepath in pursuit. Fortunately for us, while the Typhon can control minds and have a certain kind of intelligence, they're not omniscient. Bare takes the opportunity to pull open a menu and install a new Neuromod, using the information he acquired from scanning the Telepath. One gruesome injection later, and Yu is now able to use Psychoshock attacks himself.

Armed with that new ability, Yu goes on the offensive. One well-placed Psychoshock attack shuts the Telepath down temporarily, providing the perfect window of opportunity to place a weird-looking explosive contraption on the creature's body. Yu rushes away, just before a blast obliterates the Typhon. What was once a being the size of a refrigerator is reduced to an inky-black smear and a little pile of blocks.

Players can pop unwanted items into recycling stations that are scattered throughout Talos I, where they're reduced to crafting materials. "This is a portable version, not-safe version that somebody on the station was working on," Bare says. After finding the plans, Yu can go to one of the ship's many 3D-fabricating stations, and build his own. "Now you can recycle things that you wouldn't ordinarily be able to. You can't lug a table around and put it in a recycling bin, but you can recycle it with this thing. Pretty much

anything that's not bolted down, within the radius of the charge, will get crunched down, and it will spit out those materials."

Now that the Telepath is defeated, the voice over the intercom beckons us over to the kitchen. A cook has safely holed himself up behind the kitchen's shutters. His robotic friend begins to speak, but the cook smacks it with a spoon. Defeating the Telepath opens up an optional side quest, in which the cook wants us to retrieve something from his room in exchange for a stash of items he's secured in the freezer. As enticing as that may sound, that's going to have to wait.

It's time to resume our mission to Deep Storage, which means we have to head to Danielle's room to collect those voice samples. There, we find her personal TranScribe. "For the player, it's an abstraction of all the game data that you want to keep track of," Bare says. "Fictionally, it's like everybody's portable laptop/PDA that's proprietary to

TranStar outfitted Talos I with a design sensibility that Arkane calls Neo Deco. You'll notice a different twist on classic art deco

Players can recycle their unwanted items by visiting stations or carrying around this portable — and experimental — grenade

TranStar employees."

He opens up Yu's TranScribe, and we see a variety of menus. Arkane says Prey has more RPG elements than its more recent games, and some of that's evidenced here. Players have an inventory to manage, and Yu can also acquire a variety of detrimental status ailments such as a concussion or third-degree burns. In-game, attacks are accompanied by numbers that show how much damage they're doing during combat.

"We added that precisely to make it feel more like an RPG," says lead systems designer Seth Shain. "As you upgrade your firearms skill, as you upgrade your firearm itself, you see those numbers get bigger. And we think that's an important part of the feedback. And range is a factor, because we don't want players to annihilate everything from across the level. Having the numbers present makes the whole thing feel a little more stat-based. That's another way we're a little more RPG-ish than Dishonored. In Dishonored it was a little more tactical, fast-action stuff. You knew a city guard had about three sword slashes worth of health, whereas in Prey it's like you can shoot a mimic with several bullets from far away or a couple of bullets close up. Or one upgraded bullet."

Danielle's TranScribe has a voice sample in it, but it's not enough to crack the voice lock. The cryptically snipped conversation refers to a meeting at the rec center, which sounds as though it involves something that breaks TranStar policy. We need more samples, so we're directed to a lounge called the Yellow Tulip. Before you roll your eyes at yet another audio-log mission, a bit of lore explains how these devices work: TranScribes automatically record the last few conversations that its user had. "I get that there's one dude who journals, but not everybody journals. It's a little thing, but it's a pet peeve of mine," Bare says. "Can we do this but not do the 'Everybody leaves an audio log by their dead body' kind of thing? Instead, everyone has instant messenger things, and those things have conversation histories. Why not have an audio conversation history, so when you find this dead guy's thing here's his conversation history?"
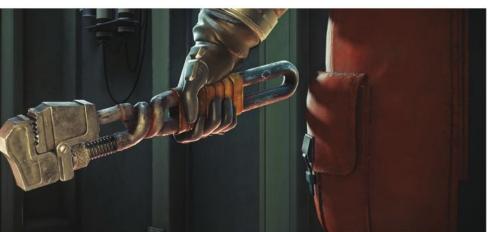
In addition to the clue about the Yellow Tulip, we have a few other opportunities to get voice samples. For instance, players who upgrade their repair levels could fix a broken TranScribe in the room and glean the information from that. According to Arkane, players have several ways to fulfil the mission objectives, many of which account for differing player builds and play styles.

SPACE PARANOIDS
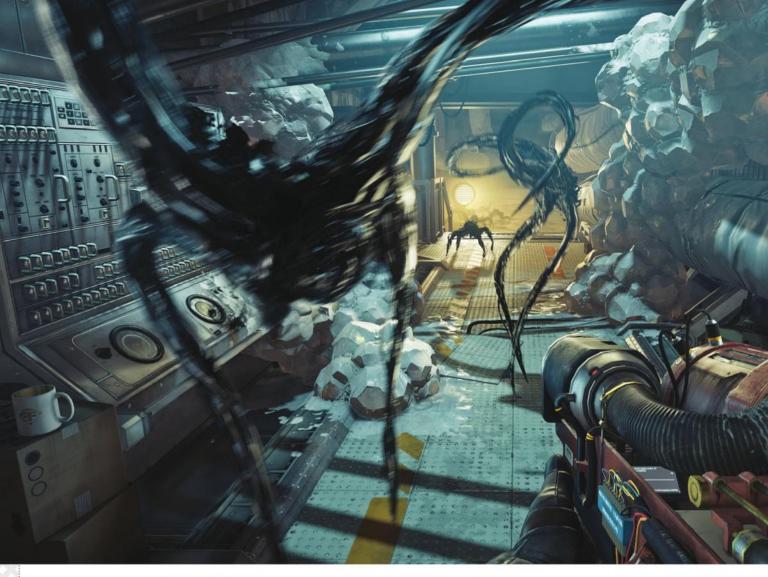
The Typhon may look weird, but that's not what makes them such a great gaming foe. So far, we've only seen a few dopey (but deadly) space balls and a mind-controlling monstrosity. The QuakeCon demo showed how the Mimic can reduce a hardened player into a shivering wreck who wastes ammo on garbage cans. Now we're about to get a taste of Prey's creepier side.

We head into the station's recreation center, which is unoccupied and still. A bar runs along one side, as well as some cozy nooks that seem like perfect spots for coworkers to decompress after a long day of extracting exotic materials from aliens. As a video display flashes on without provocation, it's clear we're not going to have time to relax.

Suddenly, lamps and chairs begin to move, knocked over by some unseen force. Ladies and gentlemen, we're in the presence of a Poltergeist. This creature may not strictly be of the paranormal sort, but that doesn't make it any less unsettling.

WHY PREY?

Prey shares a name with Human Head's 2006 game, but that's the only thing the games have in common. A sequel was in development, but publisher Bethesda canceled the project. "It wasn't where we wanted it to be, and we didn't see and couldn't find a path going forward for that game to be the game that we had signed up for, spent money on, and invested in, and we weren't just going to keep going forward just because," says Pete Hines, vice president of PR and marketing at Bethesda.

"We felt like, at its core, we liked the basic idea of Prey and what it represented in terms of aliens and you being hunted and on the run," Hines says. "And we thought it was a cool name. If you remove for a moment the notion of any game called Prey previously, we just thought it was a cool name that evoked what this game was about. In the discussions we had with Arkane, they were like, 'Look, if we can do everything that we have planned and whatever we want and not be beholden to anything anyone has done — shipped or canceled — and just reimagine what Prey means going forward, then we're totally on board for that.'"

In other words, don't expect any references to the older games, be it characters, lore, or Blue Oyster Cult songs. Arkane Studios has its own vision for this game, and they're sticking to it.

Yu can't see the creature, so we have to rely on watching the environment for clues. Did that glass just move? Did I catch a glimpse of something over there? Whoa, there's a couch heading straight for my head!

The Poltergeist likes to lurk, unseen, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. It can do so by hurling large objects at the player, which, if they aren't avoided, can lead to bone-breaking results. Or it can use its Lift Field ability to create a column of force to trap its victims. After a minute of careful observation, we see the Poltergeist flash into view – another perfect opportunity for Yu to hose the

creature down with a confining layer of the GLOO Cannon's foam. Bare places a recycle charge on the prone Poltergeist and it's gone in a flash – but this time, for good.

Conceptually, the Poltergeist encounter was cool, but the outcome seemed similar to the earlier battle with the Telepath. Sensing that, Bare reloaded it and showed a different way to fight the creature. This time, instead of relying on the GLOO Cannon, Yu used his Mimic ability to shapeshift into a trash can. Players can choose to take on the form of just about anything in the world, provided it's not living material and that it's roughly the same size

or smaller than Yu. The trash can's cylindrical shape means that it can scoot across the floor at a steady clip, which makes it a nice candidate for this encounter. Bare sneaks in, and sees the unsuspecting Poltergeist. Unfortunately, the Poltergeist spies him, too – a garbage can is only a convincing disguise when it isn't rolling around on its own.

We hop out of our mimicked form, only to be lifted into the air. We mitigate the fall with a few pulses of the propulsion suit, and the battle continues. The Poltergeist throws some large crates our way, but this time we're prepared. Using his Remote Manipulation ability, Yu catches the objects in mid-air and returns them back toward the Poltergeist. They smack the Typhon, causing damage. After a few rounds of high-stakes catch, the Poltergeist is dead. Both versions of the encounter ended with a Typhon corpse, but it was great to see the potential variety in the battles, thanks in no small part to Yu's suite of Psi powers.

Before we leave the recreation center, we see evidence of Danielle's illicit meeting. Character sheets are scattered on the table, along with something that looks like a Nerf crossbow. Checking a TranScribe, we hear the last moments from a recent – and

Arkane's art directors wanted creatures to look mysterious and unknowable, which is why they appear with a blurry filter

hit play on the board. The nightclub springs to life with the sound of the performance, a catchy pop song that, in our demo, features Colantonio's placeholder vocals.

As you might expect, the sound attracts some nearby Typhon, who are more than willing to share their thoughts. Several Phantoms come in, eerie human-shaped creatures that Yu battles with everything in his arsenal. Kinetic Blasts stun the creatures, which can then be shot with pistols. One is knocked into the air with the Poltergeist's Lift Field. Eventually, the room is cleared. Or is it? The silence is broken as a keytar plays a few notes by itself. Is it an electrical problem? Or are we in the presence of another Poltergeist?

BUILDING BETTER WORLDS

We end our trip to Talos I with a quick stop at the arboretum. "It's at the very top of the space station," Bare says. "It's a little bit like a hub map, it connects lots of different places. The cool thing about it is that it's like an artificial park. It's really beautiful; it has these special genetically created trees to survive in a space station, created for the employees." TranStar understands that having its employees deployed at the station for a few months to several years can be tough – as evidenced from emails players can read from family back on Earth. To help mitigate feelings of homesickness, and to attract the best and brightest, the station is filled with creature comforts.

The arboretum is also home to the CEO's office, which is situated high above the park on a rocky perch. The lift is out of order and security is high, but players who don't want to go to the trouble of doing it the "legitimate" way can make a foamy ladder with the GLOO Cannon or do what Bare did: use a series of Lift Fields to create an ersatz elevator.

The area is beautiful and serene, which is helped in no small part by the fact that Bare turned off enemies for our brief stop. The place has a sense of unreality to it, from the piped-in bird sounds to the way the shadows crawl across the ground thanks to an accelerated orbit. "It's fake in the world," Bare says. "It's deliberately crafted as an artificial place, like a Disney park. If I go around to the other side, to the boulders, you can look down on top of them and see that they're hollowed out and there are trusses on the other side. They're all fake rocks, basically."

That kind of attention to detail – fake as it might be – is one of the reasons Prey feels so believable. Arkane has painstakingly created this world down to the most mundane details. Players can find bottled water from the station's water-recirculation plant or learn more about how Neuromods are sold and distributed if they explore the station's marketing offices. The station's security detail is outfitted with weapons like pistols and shotguns – not rocket launchers, which would be implausible. The little details are accounted for, which goes a long way.

"We really wanted to have the full logic of this space, and have this full space station make sense," Colantonio says. "How they grow food, how they recycle things, where they live, as opposed to being just a set of random corridors." That means human corpses aren't just random bodies. They all have names, and they had jobs when things were calmer on Talos I.

That affects gameplay, too, and in surprising ways. "The Typhon are able to convert dead bodies into Phantoms," Bare says. "Occasionally, when you run into a Phantom and you defeat a Phantom and you go to loot them, in addition to alien organs and that kind of stuff, you'll find things like, 'Oh, this guy must have been a security guard; here's a pistol and a keycard to his room in the crew quarters.' So now you have your own sidequest to run back to the crew quarters and open up this guy's room and see what he has."

"If you meet the monster who creates Phantoms, you can learn the power yourself," Colantonio says of the Weavers, which we didn't get a chance to see.

"Then you run away," Bare adds.
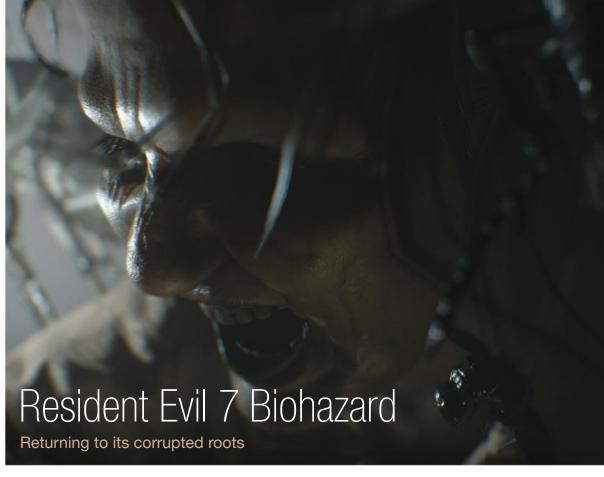
Of course, you don't have to. If you want, you can choose to try your luck – and your unique character build – and see how you fare. It all comes down to experimentation and discovery, which is deeply ingrained in the Arkane experience.

"We're all gamers here, we love this kind of game," Bare says. "It's a good general rule that if we identify something as gamers, as this is something that's exciting to us, then it's probably going to be exciting to other people. If you're not into what you're working on, why should anyone else be?" ◈

For more information on Prey, including exclusive video interviews with the developers, a deeper look at how the art team designed Talos I, and more, visit gameinformer.com/prey

very nerdy – tabletop-gaming session. With another voice sample down, it's time to go to the Yellow Tulip. You can grab that crossbow, too, if you're so inclined. It might only annoy most Typhon, but its nonlethal projectiles will at least distract a Cystoid.

The Yellow Tulip nightclub was the site of a recent Neuromod demonstration. Thanks to TranStar's technology, people without any musical ability can learn to play an instrument, provided they have the cash and an optic nerve. We head into the recording booth and

Recyclers reduce objects to their core essence, which in turn can be used to craft new items

Resident Evil 7 Biohazard

Returning to its corrupted roots

When Capcom first announced Resident Evil 7 earlier this year, fans were taken aback by the new direction, which cast players as an unknown character in a first-person tour of a horror-filled mansion. Despite Capcom's insistence that RE 7 would remain true to the brand, fans had trouble recognizing their beloved survival horror franchise in early demos, which seemed inspired by games like Amnesia: The Dark Descent and P.T. After spending nearly five hours with the game, however, I finally understand why it deserves to be called Resident Evil.

While RE 7 is tonally different from the last few Resident Evil games, it is still part of the series' core timeline. It takes place four years after the events of Resident Evil 6, in the fictional city of Dulvey, Louisiana. After a short opening sequence (which I didn't get to play), I take control of Ethan Winters, a man who came to the derelict Baker family plantation looking for his missing wife. Unfortunately, Ethan quickly becomes hostage to the Bakers, a tribe of mentally unstable individuals who have the remarkable ability to regenerate missing limbs and even bounce back from seemingly fatal wounds. What the Baker family wants with Ethan, along with the mystery behind their disturbing gift, seems to be a major part of the story, but I only got the first few clues to the mystery during my playthrough.

"We had three consecutive Resident Evil titles filled with action, and we figured this would be a good time to switch gears and challenge ourselves to do something new," says series producer Masachika Kawata. "The past few titles have increased to a grander scale, and as we approached the 20th anniversary and evaluated the series' legacy and roots, we were inspired to create something more personal this time around."
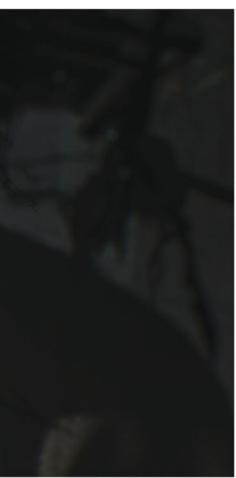
Resident Evil's roots become more apparent as I travel deeper into the Baker family's home. The plantation itself is a sprawling locale, and features its own greenhouse, garage, and guest house. You gradually unlock new areas as you collect new items and keys, much like early Resident Evil games. Some areas feature light puzzles, which can be as simple as finding three dog-head plaques to unlock a door, or as complex as rotating objects under a light so the shadows mimic an image on the wall. In an incinerator room, I decipher a note detailing the number of furnace doors to open so I can retrieve a much-needed key.

"If you look at just the gameplay that's been shown so far, you may think of it as a reboot at first, but the story and narrative have shaped up to fit the series as a numbered title," says Kawata. "It is still a Resident Evil title, which draws on the series' roots of horror, exploration, puzzles, and combat while offering something new. Rather than playing it safe and sticking with what we're used to, we strived to create something new that would impact players in a different way with a more immersive, personal experience."

Resource management is another important Resident Evil staple, and it's an important part of Resident Evil 7. A limited number of crafting resources allow you to make more ammo or health vials, but since these craftable resources often share components, you often have to decide between topping off your health or reloading your weapons.

It doesn't take me long to feel tension while looking at my meager supplies, because the Baker family aren't the only inhabitants in this dusty mansion. In the basement, I find a collection of oily, black monstrosities called Molded, and fighting them forces me to burn through a healthy supply of shotgun shells. Outside, near the greenhouse, I encounter a hive of raccoon-sized wasps that give me the opportunity to put my makeshift flamethrower to good use.

Resident Evil 7's gunplay feels relatively good, but Ethan isn't a trained killer, and his reloading animation is painfully slow. Thankfully, you can upgrade Ethan's skills by purchasing steroids from locked birdcages, which are usually found inside safe rooms.

The five hours I spent with Resident Evil 7 are the tensest hours I've had playing a Resident Evil game in over a decade. While Capcom kept fans in the dark about this title far longer than we would have liked, I'm glad the developer is resurrecting the puzzle-solving and exploration elements from the series' heyday. I still have a few questions about Resident Evil 7, but Capcom put many of my fears to rest during this terrifying demo.

"In order to fully enjoy a horror title, we don't think it's good to release too much information beforehand," says Kawata. "What's hidden in the darkness? Who are the enemies? How do I escape? These are questions we would prefer to leave unanswered before the player experiences the game, so that they can uncover things on their own. As a result, we understand some fans have questions about the contents of the game, but we assure you that we're ready to deliver a Resident Evil horror experience of the utmost quality."

» **Ben Reeves**

Throughout the environment you'll find antique coins, which can be used at birdcages like this to purchase various upgrades and weapons

These black tendriled monsters are called the Molded

Yooka-Laylee

An exciting return to the mascot platformer

Playtonic's "Rare-vival" is shaping up to be the Banjo-Kazooie successor its Kickstarter campaign promised it would be. We played for an hour in one of its earliest levels, Tribalstack Tropics, acclimating ourselves to controlling the chameleon and bat duo, meeting its colorful cast of characters, completing challenges, and recognizing all of its direct ties to Banjo-Kazooie.

Yooka and Laylee (the chameleon and bat, respectively) are on a mission to collect Pagies stolen by the evil Capital B. That smarmy businessman is intent on converting the world's literature into profit, and that's a problem.

Yooka-Laylee's abilities fall in line with other comparable platformers, with a high-speed continuous roll for speedy navigation, a floating double-jump (which Laylee assists with), and a high jump. Yooka can also use his tongue to grab power-ups, and Laylee can use sonar to send sound waves and uncover invisible objects.

Yooka is an optimistic chameleon, eager to help, and Laylee is a complete jerk. She openly breaks the fourth wall to complain about collectibles, comes up with rude nicknames for the characters you meet, and yells at a Pagie for not trying to escape its cell by moving
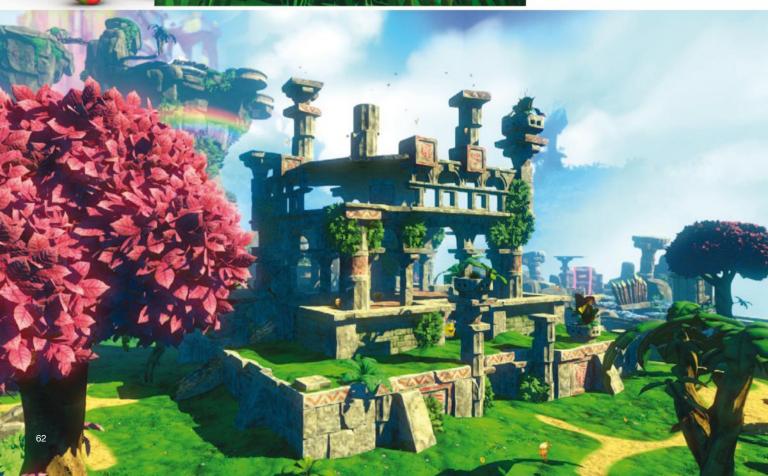
through the bars sideways. A Pagie is a piece of paper after all.

Our demo starts with the entirety of Tribalstack Tropics open to us, but in normal playthroughs, the levels expand slowly as you make progress so as not to overwhelm the player. As you collect the game's Pagies (the equivalent to Banjo-Kazooie's puzzle pieces) and Quills (the equivalent to Banjo-Kazooie's musical notes) you expand the levels to reveal more collectibles and challenges. Each level consists of 30 Pagies and 200 Quills, though you will have to expand the levels in order to get them all.

Alongside expanding the levels or visiting new ones with Pagies, Quills allow you to unlock new abilities of your choice. Trowzer, the snake wearing pants, functions as your store for new abilities and levels. He also awards you a free ability for opening each new level. His name and character design is also a perfect example of the tongue-in-cheek sense of humor.

Tribalstack Tropics is huge, with clearly defined challenges strewn throughout. I find a skeleton trapped in a boiling pot of water by a collection of enemies I must ward off so he can escape. High up in the level, at the top of a waterfall, a sentient cloud

DON'T WORRY SCOFFSALOT, WE'LL HELP FIND YOUR KNIGHTS. ..

complains that his wife left him for a typhoon, and asks us to use the nearby special-ability fruits to fill him with water, set him on fire, and freeze him. By opening up the windows of a temple in the middle of the level, I find a shooting gallery that awards a Pagie for successful completion.

At the top of the mountain, we meet Kartos, a talking minecart who offers a ride. This sequence is reminiscent of Donkey Kong Country's minecart sequences and awards a Pagie for a successful, high-speed sprint down the track. It's a nice change of pace from the platforming challenges of the rest of the level.

I find a Mollycool, who looks like a colorful electron, and later meet Dr. Puzz, who asks for the Mollycool. She's an octopus-like creature with a fishbowl on her head who can turn you into different creatures. In this level, Dr. Puzz turns you into a flower, which allows you to speak with sentient flowers and pollinate them. I find another flower separated from the larger group who offers a hint about finding another Pagie, before turning back into my original self.

Alongside the missions driven by strange characters, who speak in the telltale Banjo-Kazooie-style gibberish,

Serpent salesman Trowzer is the guardian of Yooka-Laylee's unlockable special moves. Just make sure he doesn't rip you off...

players can tackle plenty of straight-forward platforming challenges. For one, I use Laylee's sonar ability to reveal invisible platforms that go higher and higher, culminating in a Pagie. The next challenge involves a climb where I must dodge fireballs, while another has me using the roll ability to speed through a series of rings before a timer runs out.

All of these feats are seamlessly integrated into the open environment and can be tackled in any order. Many of the characters you meet, like the food-obsessed pig whom Laylee is eager to insult, even sets up their missions in such a way where they do not have to be completed immediately. You can talk to everyone, find out what they need, and start exploring.

Other collectibles include Arcade Tokens and Ghost Writers. Arcade Tokens allow you to unlock an arcade cabinet in each level, which is placed in Yooka-Laylee's personal arcade where retro-style games can be played. Ghost Writers are essentially characters with miniature trials that must be completed in order to be collected. Some might require you fight them, while others try to run from you or ask that you use a special attack on them.

Developer Playtonic makes no qualms about its Banjo-Kazooie inspiration. It's the foundation upon which the game was funded by fans, and it feels like Rare's Nintendo 64 platformer in all the right ways. The small dev team is clearly passionate about the bygone days of the cartoon platformer, and returning to the genre with the impressive visual capabilities of current-gen consoles is a boon.

» Kyle Hilliard

Players can choose to spend their Pagies unlocking new worlds or expanding already-unlocked environments, making them larger, more complex, and bursting with additional challenges

Project Wight

Prey becomes predator

A few weeks ago, The Outsiders, a studio formed by former Battlefield developers, revealed a sneak preview of its first title. The three-minute look at the game, which has a working title of "Project Wight," showcased a small creature sneaking around caves as it's being hunted by bloodthirsty Vikings. The clip strongly suggests a survival-horror vibe akin to Alien: Isolation and Amnesia, but Dave Goldfarb, co-founder of The Outsiders, says it's not a pure horror game. "I think it's more of an action-RPG," he says. "There are horror elements to some extent, but there are really because of the inversion of things rather than it being a typical horror game. It's not that."

As the game goes on, the creature becomes more powerful, growing into its adolescent form. The latter half of the trailer showed the monster soaring across a beach to land on a Norse encampment, where it promptly bit into the neck of a Viking, killing him. Goldfarb says game draws inspiration from John Gardner's *Grendel*, a retelling of the Beowulf legend that makes the eponymous Grendel a sympathetic character. "I always loved the Beowulf stories, but the Grendel story, it was deeply meaningful to me because I felt great sympathy for this creature and I always sided with the loser and the underdog and the outcast and the monster," he says. "I felt like those were much more compelling to me personally. And no one ever tells it from that perspective. There's great value to finding what it feels like to be on the other side of the sword."

However, Project Wight isn't a narrative-driven experience. "Basically what we have is a background or setting, and the player is generating the narrative insofar as interactions with the world and the things in the world and the enemies in the world go," he says. "I can't really give more detail than that, but that's really the center of the narrative. It's not like, "Oh let me go up to this dude and talk to him and he's gonna give me a quest." This is a highly systemic game."

When I asked Goldfarb whether the preview offered a concrete look at what Project Wight would be upon completion or whether it was more of a thematic teaser akin to what PT was intended to be for the doomed Silent Hills, he said the sneak preview was of a working prototype,

demonstrating an early version of the game would ultimately play like. "It's a prototype, right?" he says. "We've been working on these mechanics. Will they be exactly like this in the final product? I can't say. I hope they are better. And if they're not, then we've done something wrong. But the core thing there, the movement and the biting, those things, like those are things that I can't imagine them going anywhere."

A fair bit of mystery surrounds Project Wight – including what platforms it will ultimately come too – and The Outsiders tell me we won't see our next glimpse of the game for a while. But what we've seen so far is enticing, especially for those who want to play games from new perspectives.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

Hot Lava

Childhood nostalgia meets elite parkour

Klei Entertainment is rapidly building a reputation for its broad and eclectic game oeuvre. After projects like Mark of the Ninja, Invisible, Inc., and Don't Starve, its newest project taps into a pretend experience almost all of us played in some form as children, while simultaneously seeking inspiration from a niche group of elite video gamers. Hot Lava challenges players to leap and swing their way from chair to bookcase to sofa without touching the ground, but the gameplay is inspired by the players of Counter-Strike parkour mods and their wildly improbable jumping skills.

"When you watch them on YouTube, it's clear as day that this is an amazing thing that they're doing, and it's beautiful to watch," says designer Mark Laprairie. "We wanted to take the nugget of what made those mods so appealing, wrap it in an exterior, tutorialize it, and build it up in a way that would let more casual players get into those parkour mechanics that those niche players have enjoyed for so long."

With little experience in the elite first-person parkour style of play, I quickly picked up the concepts of Hot Lava and moved through levels, puzzling out how to reach the next checkpoint, nailing the timing for long jumps, and delighting in the visuals of the game, which translate familiar locales into lava-soaked hellscapes. I was increasingly intrigued the longer I spent exploring. A seemingly simple interface proves itself to be anything but, with minute mouse movements and keyboard inputs governing success and failure. Like the first-person mods from which Hot Lava draws inspiration, expert players can do things like stacking velocity from jump to jump, or dramatic leaping turns that change direction midflight.

The environments players parkour through provide wistful recollections of distinct periods in a person's life, and reinforce the idea that we're always just a step away from the childlike glee of scrambling up off the floor. "You're kind of progressing through life as a character," Laprairie says. "You're going from school, to your house, to grocery stores, all the way up to your working life in an office – to things that aren't so exciting anymore, where you have to escape your day job by jumping on the furniture."

Most of my time with Hot Lava was played solo, but the game also offers multiplayer. Your parkour adventures along chairs, lockers, grocery carts, and water fountains can be played in a group of up to eight players, each of whom appears in the world engaged in their own time trials and challenges. "We find that people have the most fun with this game when they have

Starting over after falling into lava is a fast process, ensuring you can quickly get back into the jumping action

Up to eight players can play together in a single play space

their 'big brother' over their shoulder, either helping or harassing you to move forward. We are really trying to build that into the experience," Laprairie says. You can see every other player as they leap and climb through the environment.

With eight players in the group, it would be easy for the experience to devolve into bad online behavior. While Klei is happily implementing taunt emotes and player speech support, it's also going out of its way to maintain the integrity of the parkour action. "We tried hard to make the griefing version of this game, with people who wield pillows and that kind of thing, because that's the first thing that comes to mind with this sort of thing – pushing your friends over into the lava," Laprairie admits. "What we found is that it really cheapened the parkour experience. So you don't have body blocking. As you approach someone, they start to fade out, so they can't even visually grief you." If a particular player is a bother, you can do more than just mute their audio – you can ignore them entirely, so that they fade out of your visual playscape.

As you try to improve, you can even spectate recognized experts. With the press of a button, you switch to their perspective, and even get displays that show when and how long that player presses each input to nail that crazy hurdle.

Controls are far deeper than they first appear, and allow for a great deal of precision
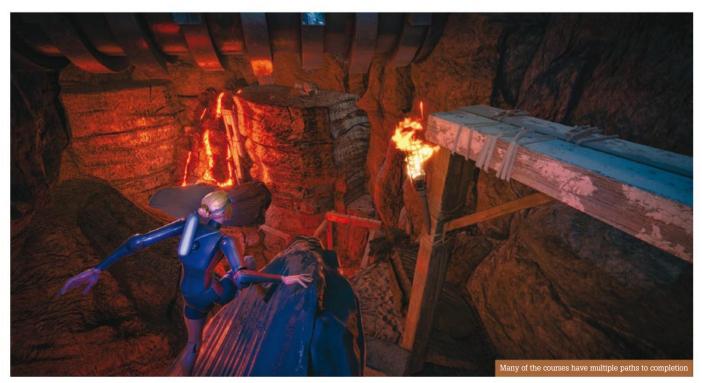
Part of what should make observing other players so entertaining is the breadth of activities offered in any given level, as represented by a badge system. "I've been comparing the badge system to the stars in Mario 64," Laprairie says. "There's one way to beat that course we laid out for you, but there's all sorts of other ways to explore. Maybe you're going on a different path, or you have a modifier, like you have rollerblades on, or you're on a pogo stick, or you've been shrunk down to the size of an action figure." Each player in your group could be doing any one of the activities, so you can expect a lot of variety in what you observe.

Behind it all, Klei has built in a humorous progression system that unlocks characters and accessories with more than a few nods to childhood cartoons and toys like G.I. Joe, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and more. The plan is to offer new characters as action figures in-box, and you'll need to tear them open, ruining their "value," in order to start playing with them in any given level.

Klei is still a long way away from final release on Hot Lava, but the team is targeting early access on PC in early 2017. In a game focused on precision and mechanics, the developers are putting a high priority on feedback from players and a long period of refinement. Controller support certainly suggests that we may hear about other platforms at some point in the future. As it is, Hot Lava already shows a lot of promise in both concept and execution, and it has the potential to be the definitive digital incarnation most of us have been playing for as long as we can remember.

» **Matt Miller**

Many of the courses have multiple paths to completion

Tekken 7

The King of the Iron Fist tournament returns

When I last played Tekken 7 at E3 in June, I enjoyed the cinematic take on the story mode as well as the colorful cast of characters the game introduces. With six more months of development under the game's belt, I caught up with series producer Katsuhiro Harada to see how development is coming along.

The latest entries, Tekken 6 and Tekken Tag Tournament 2, were well-liked, but Harada says that the new additions are immediately evident, particularly in the visual stylings. "This time, we thought a lot about not only the people playing the game, but also those spectating," he says. "We tried to make the strategic moves between players a lot more visually recognizable with cinematic elements or in the moment when a match is about to be decided, the game program detects this beforehand and slows down the attack animations in real-time. Both players and spectators feel the same amount of excitement and are united in the moment. Streams and live viewing are much more exciting as a result."

Harada hopes to alleviate any learning curve with tweaks like making recovering from a takedown easier, but he knows that the majority of the fan base is made up of casual players who don't have the urge to try and compete at the highest level. "It is a game in which it is often fun to just be able to beat a certain rival nearby," he says. "That's why matching systems and the ability to create lobbies to help find opponents close to your skill level is important."

In addition, Bandai Namco understands that some players don't even venture into versus mode, so Harada says the team has invested a lot of time into polishing modes like story and gallery to make them better than previous installments.

Ever since it hit Japanese arcades in early 2015, fans that don't have access to an arcade with the cabinet have been eagerly waiting to get their hands on Tekken 7. Unfortunately for those wanting the home console version, the wait has grown longer than many would prefer.

"Tekken and other fighting games have a long history with the arcades," Harada says. "They would always release first in the arcades and then be ported to console. And not just fighting games, but all games followed this pattern. In the arcade, a game would be updated and polished, and then released on console."

Though the fighter has been out in arcades for nearly two years, Harada says that he has remained consistent in the direction he wants to take with the home console version. "I have had the same vision from the arcade Tekken 7 release, and everything is going how I planned," he says. "Of course, there is the change brought about from the changes in the game system and balance as a result of player feedback from the arcade version."

With so much time to polish in arcades, as well as a strong first impression I had with the story mode at last E3, I'm eagerly awaiting the home console release. Unfortunately, the wide-open release window that Bandai Namco currently gives means we could be waiting a good bit longer before we're able to compete in the seventh King of the Iron Fist tournament.
» **Brian Shea**

Delivering The Content

One major criticism that has been dished out to several fighting-game franchises is the lack of content at launch. This notion was most recently attributed to Street Fighter V, but Tekken 7 producer Katsuhiro Harada is confident that there's more than enough for players to enjoy.

"The Tekken series is at least number 2, maybe even number 1 in terms of the volume of content in fighting games," he says. "The Tekken series has always worked to add more content for players to explore, even simple additions like practice mode that was first implemented in Tekken back in 1995. And then there's all the other various modes and content throughout the various installments. We have been more than living up to these expectations every time."

Gwent: The Witcher Card Game

Bringing the minigame to the main stage

The gaming world is overflowing with digital card games, from huge IPs like Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls: Legends to mobile powerhouses like Cygames' Shadowverse. CD Projekt RED is transforming the popular Witcher 3 minigame into a standalone strategy title coming to both major consoles, a market that other juggernauts like Hearthstone have still not ventured into.

Players select from major factions to play as, each with their own selection of cards and special abilities. Monsters excel at bringing swarms of units to the field and even get to keep a randomly chosen character on the field after each match, the Skellige's forces get stronger every round of a match, and the Scoia'tael can manipulate cards to better suit the situation at hand. To combat the unbalanced gameplay from Witcher 3, where you'd just sink the board with powerful rare cards, deck limits on various levels of power are enforced. Players can only bring four "gold" cards and six "silver" card copies to any battle, a restriction that ensures strategy and tactical play have an impact on the result of the game.

If you've never played Gwent, it's much different from the slew of Magic: The Gathering and Hearthstone-likes in terms of gameplay. Players do not draw each turn, cards have no resource cost, you can play only one per turn, and you keep your hand from round to round until the best-of-three match completes. In this regard, it's much more like a classic strategy game like chess or Go. Managing your strategy for the entire match is critical, not just round to round. Knowing when to give up on a losing round or knowing how to apply additional pressure that can carry over to the next round are essential learning experiences, as is determining what your opponent is likely to have in their hand and deck.

Classic Witcher characters like Geralt, Eredin, Ciri, Yennefer, and The Bloody Baron all have cards, offering plenty of quips as they enter the battlefield, often providing significant benefits (the legendary figures of the Witcher are often gold cards). In addition to playing with these high-profile characters, you can swap out the leaders of your faction deck, offering different styles of play within a larger tent.

Similar to other modern digital card games, you can earn packs by playing with in-game currency or purchase them outright. You can also "mill" extra cards you don't need down to scrap, which can be used to craft specific cards. Players that have four gold cards and six silver cards often have an advantage in terms of raw power, but right now it's not terribly hard to get that going for one competitive deck as a free-to-play player.

The final product includes a single-player story experience featuring classic characters from the franchise. Many things can still change from now to release, but CD Projekt RED looks like it has a unique and polished entry ready to join the blossoming digital card game scene. » **Daniel Tack**

Decks can only contain a certain number of high-power cards

Deformers

Off-the-wall brawl

Games are a powerful medium. They can allow us to temporarily step into the shoes of another person, getting a sense of what their lives might be like. They can be used for education, providing an engaging way for students to learn. Sometimes, games allow us to settle disputes we didn't even know existed, such as, "Who would win in a fight: a shark or a cheeseburger?"

Ready at Dawn's last game was The Order: 1886, a cinematic retelling of Arthurian legend mixed with werewolves and anachronistic steampunk action. Deformers is about as sharp a turn away from that type of game as imaginable, with adorable, half-inflated characters battling it out in arena-style combat. I hopped online and played through a few matches of the game, and even if its combatants are a little on the squishy side, it's shaping up to be a pretty strong party game.

At first glance, Deformers looks like a fully fleshed-out minigame you might find in something like Mario Party. Both its modes feature the same roly-poly heroes rolling and bouncing around colorful environments and smashing into their opponents – with realistic, physics-based collisions. In one, players battle over a ball, though Ready at Dawn is quick to point out its emphasis on combat makes it closer in spirit to rugby than soccer. The other mode is a free-for-all in which teams face off in timed bouts with the goal of defeating or knocking opponents off the stage, à la Smash Bros.

Players can pick from several cutie-pie characters, including a pug, dragon, and cupcake – as well as the aforementioned shark and cheeseburger. The forms themselves are cosmetic and ultimately don't matter; players choose a specialty before each match, focusing on how effective their ramming attacks are or the relative power of their projectiles. Or, you could do like I did and play it safe with a well-rounded approach.

The game is simple to get into, but after I lost a couple of matches it became clear that skill is involved.

You roll around the stages, picking up debris and trying to grow as large as possible. That additional mass helps when you ram into your opponents, since you do more damage and knock them farther – and hopefully out of the stage. With eight players in a relatively small area, it was a game of nearly constant contact, with desperate double-jumping to prevent getting ring-outs. The soccer/rugby variant was similarly chaotic, but the emphasis on bashing the ball around gave it a Rocket League kind of structure, which I enjoyed.

Deformers may be soft on the outside, but it has a solid core. I'm curious to see what the other stages are like, and if they offer any unique elements to keep the battle interesting. I'm certain that we will hear more from Ready at Dawn as we approach the game's winter release. » **Jeff Cork**

GameTrust is the publishing label of GameStop, the parent company of Game Informer. All opinions in this review are the author's, based on his experience with the game

Loot Rascals

Gradually deepening complexity

Loot Rascals has generated buzz among indie enthusiasts in recent months, and for good reason. The deceptively deep game has some core mechanics that set it apart from any other strategy title I've encountered, and the charming presentation hides the need for careful character improvement and attention to the ever-broadening maps and stages.

Loot Rascals opens with a brief and amusing cinematic that introduces the basic concept: I'm an astronaut whose mission goes wildly off course when my ship crash lands on the planet I was sent to investigate. Strange creatures run rampant, and I need to figure a way to escape. The bright colors, exaggerated smiles, and silly names lend a carefree and childlike quality to the presentation.

Gameplay focuses on navigating a growing hexagonal grid and fighting the monsters you encounter along the way. While movement is freeform and active, the game is actually turn-based with each new hex I enter. Monsters have their own movement behaviors, so I have to watch each one with care. Initiative after a fight begins is a big factor; whether a creature will attack or defend first shifts every few turns as the day/night cycle flips back and forth. Careful movement allows you to ambush a foe when they're unable to fight back.

The game's moniker comes from the strong focus on loot management that arises after fights conclude. Monsters often drop cards that can be added to your inventory and then equipped onto your personal grid. In addition to standard defensive and offensive capabilities, these cards often have increased effects if placed in a certain way, such as adding two points to the value of a defensive card on its right, or being worth three more attack points if it's the only card of its type. Over time, an optimization loop emerges that is all about balancing your card placements and choosing which loot to keep and which to dismantle.

The map also grows more complex as you explore. Ice hexes send you spinning across to the far side, unless an obstacle or monster gets in the way. Other hexes block use of your abilities. Yet others are traps that trigger on particular turns. All the while, you're balancing the desire to venture farther out against the need to return to your home base to complete quests (like finding a particular card that can be traded for increased inventory space), heal up, or collect your mail to pick up returned cards.

Your card grid has a comlpex interplay of how each card affects the cards around it

You can return to a home base area to collect mail, heal up, and complete other tasks

This last feature hints at Loot Rascals' other unusual system, whereby collected loot can interact with the loot gathered by other players in their own games. When you die, the monster that defeated you steals some of your best cards. Players in a different game can then defeat strong monsters and gather the loot you dropped, at which point they can either keep it for themselves, or send it back. Holographic representations of other players can show up in your game as well, and they might help or even attack you, depending on whether you held on to their precious cards.

Loot Rascals is charming, surprising, and deeper than it appears at first glance. I'm eager to see the online player interactions that unfold once a full community has formed. Developer Hollow Ponds is targeting release early in 2017, when we'll find out just how selfish or selfless players really are. » Matt Miller

Sniper Elite 4

Karl Fairburne goes to Italy

The next chapter in the Sniper Elite World War II epic picks up where the previous game left off, taking Karl Fairburne to the Mediterranean. In Italy, he has to deal with the fallout of the events of Sniper Elite III, as he fights alongside the Italian Resistance and its war on fascism.

The first thing I notice about Karl's latest adventure is the environment. I played the second level, Bittani Village. The coastal town is big and colorful, but it has a real nasty Nazi problem. The new setting affords the game a much broader color template with reds, greens, and blues covering the village's assorted roofs. The town is also layered in such a way that it is easy to climb and get high quickly – a perfect setting for an expert sniper.

I pull up my binoculars and mark as many enemies as I can find, before realizing I am looking over the head of one standing only a few feet in front of me. He sees me, so I bolt away, firing off my loud machine gun. I take out the enemy, and leave behind a red silhouette showing my last known location, which makes sneaking into the town a little bit easier.

Bittani Village is large, leaving plenty of opportunity for impressive long-distance shots. The map is littered with small side-mission icons, as well as large markers for the few missions required to complete the level. One task involves me tracking down satchel charges in order to break into a church for supplies. Despite gruesomely killing dozens on my way to the church, Karl quips, "Now I am going to hell," as he blows open a makeshift entrance to the church.

Sniper Elite's memorable x-ray shots make a return. Watching your bullet fly through the air in slow-motion and arrive at its destination to knock out teeth and make the spongy brain bounce around in your enemy's skull is still intense. Those x-ray shots have now been extended to the instant melee kills for when you carefully sneak up behind an enemy. Seeing Karl plunge a knife through a clavicle in the slow motion is just as gruesome as watching a bullet burst an eyeball.

After spending about an hour in the level, breaking into the church, taking out a competing sniper, and blowing up a nearby gun boat with a well-placed shot to its gasoline tank, I finally make my way to the Resistance group to meet its leader, Angel. She identifies me as the SOE Sniper and says we need to talk, which ends the demo.

Sniper Elite's fourth entry is not a radical reimagining of the sniper gameplay Elite has been iterating on since 2005. It does, however, make efforts to make things bigger. It is also the first Sniper Elite made exclusively for current-gen consoles, lending it a noticeable visual sharpening, especially in the x-ray kills, which continue to be the series' main draw. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Some of the big changes from Sniper Elite III include significantly larger levels, more traversal abilities, improved A.I., and more side-missions

Star Citizen

Checking in on a galaxy far, far away from release

Four years and more than $130 million removed from its initial crowd-funding campaign, fans are still waiting in star ports for their ticket to the full Star Citizen experience. Cloud Imperium Games' ridiculously ambitious space combat simulation, which consists of a dedicated campaign component and persistent online universe, still has no official release date, but the recently released 2.5 alpha update showcases more of the disconnected pieces that may one day coalesce into a sprawling space universe.

After more than a year since checking in with the game, we booted up the latest version to see how the progress is coming along. Star Citizen content is currently segregated into individual silos of content – the arena commander dogfighting zone, a standalone hangar for checking out purchased space ships, and three discrete persistent universe locations.

We first visit ArcCorp's Area 18, a retail and social hub of a much larger city. The skyscraper-lined skyline looks reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, but it must be vacation season because the area is largely unpopulated. The bars, medical bays, and shops have minimal human presence, and only a few NPCs manning the cash registers. What it lacks in interactivity it supplements with commerce; with the amount of weapons, ships, and outfits available for purchase you start to understand how this game continues to rake in the money with minimal content available to play.

The module that gives you the best idea of what to expect from a content-complete Star Citizen is Crusader. This miniature persistent environment allows you to wander a space station to once again go shopping, but also take your ship out for a spin in the wider universe. Once you fly away from the station you can cycle through a series of missions like investigating distress signals, targeting rogue players who aren't playing by the rules, salvaging wreckage, and repairing satellite arrays.

I choose to quantum travel to investigate an ICC Probe. Once I arrive at my destination I meet Tessa, an NPC stationed in the region who asks me to check out a distress beacon. As soon as I jump to the asteroid belt where the signal originates, however, I'm ambushed by space pirates. A brief dogfighting encounter ensues, after which I'm free to pursue my mission goal. Once I get close enough to the beacon I must disembark my ship to investigate. The seamless exiting and boarding of ships while in space is a great touch that opens up many gameplay possibilities, including boarding rival ships.

Spacefarers with more nefarious inclinations can also work against the greater good to disable crucial satellite arrays or attack other players. Taking illicit actions results in being branded with a wanted level, making you a public enemy. However, it also grants you passage to the Grim HEX, a pirate base built onto the side of an asteroid belt. This base once again is outfitted with several shops for buying pirate gear. The Crusader module also features a security post dedicated to PvP FPS fare and multiplayer ships players can take out with a crew (think *Millennium Falcon*).

When you imagine each of these core elements seamlessly blending together in one unified experience, the allure of Star Citizen is understandable. The long development cycle and persistent delays continually add fuel to the argument that Cloud Imperium bit off more than it can chew, but anything is possible in the great expanse of space.
» **Matt Bertz**

World Of Warcraft: Legion

Keeping the content rolling

One of the problems games like World of Warcraft run into over the long run is endgame content. Players eagerly gobble up expansion pack offerings and find their interest waning as patches containing sizable content fail to appear. That's been the story for Blizzard's epic MMORPG for the past few years, with huge content chunks being shoved out at the beginning of an expansion's lifetime but little to satiate players as they wait for the next pack. That steady stream of significant content is course-corrected in a huge way with Legion, which has already brought players a new raid, Karazhan, and tons of other important tweaks since release. With giant patches like 7.2, players can expect to see new content constantly and consistently all the way to the next expansion.

The Tomb of Sargeras patch takes players back to the Broken Shore where they began the expansion, and tasks them with establishing a foothold in order to lay siege to the Legion stronghold. The Class Order questlines continue here, with additional world quests and some important building options.

Before Legion launched, players were treated to demon invasions across Azeroth. Those return in the Broken Isles areas, and players can even participate in a new three-player scenario.

Flying has always been a hot topic when it comes to expansion content, and 7.2 allows players to unlock Broken Isles flying account-wide by completing an achievement. By gaining reputation and completing a questline with the

Flying comes to the Broken Isles, allowing players to travel quickly

new Legionfall faction on the Broken Isles, you can unlock an epic class mount as well.

It wouldn't be a hot new patch without plenty of dungeoneering. The new raid, the Tomb of Sargeras, contains nine new bosses and lets you seal the portal to Azeroth off (for good?). Not into raiding? Good news, there's a brand new five-person dungeon called the Cathedral of Eternal Night featuring four bosses as well. If PvP is your thing, Blizzard is bringing the "brawls" from games like Overwatch, Hearthstone, and Heroes of the Storm to WoW, featuring modes like 15v15 arena and zero-gravity combat.
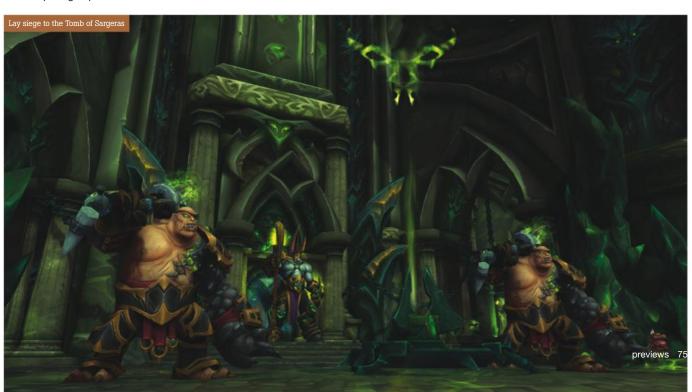
If all that isn't enough, your character continues to progress through the artifact system as new traits become unlocked and available. New traits and the ability to add a fourth point to your existing traits are all available, and a catch-up system is in place to help those coming into the expansion late reach parity with their seasoned veteran comrades. New relics to tweak your build and appearances to hang around Azeroth in style are also available for your artifact weapon. Players must complete a solo challenge in order to unlock a special weapon skin.

One of the big questions on everyone's mind when Legion hit was whether it would suffer the deadly content droughts of Mists of Pandaria and Warlords of Draenor. With a solid patch already under its belt and tons of new content coming, Legion is getting the support it needs to keep WoW solidified as the leader of the MMORPG pack.

» **Daniel Tack**

Lay siege to the Tomb of Sargeras

Need To Know

The moral conflict of mass surveillance

Back in 2013, former CIA operative Edward Snowden made headlines when he released confidential information about the National Security Agency without authorization. He's been branded a whistleblower, a hero, and a traitor. Would you have done the same?

Management sim Need to Know, from the Australian indie developer Monomyth Games, asks you this question and more. The game tasks you with taking on the role of spying on American citizens on a vast scale, and experiencing the repercussions that come with it.

You experience the day-to-day life of an NSA agent rising through the ranks. Bearing heavy similarities to the gameplay of the indie hit Papers, Please, the game tasks you with pinpointing security threats from one person to the next based on clues you find in their data. This data comes in the form of text messages, social media posts, web searches, and credit card purchases.

During your work day, you interact with coworkers, socialize in the evenings, and take phone calls from friends and family. You log onto a computer system and view a horizontally-scrolling map of the world, with glowing nodes appearing in the United States. Clicking these reveals a citizen's personal data, and from there, you use programs at your disposal to identify and flag security threats.

With a list of suspicious keywords, names, and topics to look out for, you need to see whether these appear inside the information you dig through. It's never too difficult, though the gameplay I played is part of an alpha build, meaning it is not final and subject to change as the game nears release. More features are planned to be added as well once the game launches. Depending on the evidence you get correct and the threats you may miss, your compliance level will fluctuate with your performance. If it falls below zero percent, you lose the game. As your compliance level increases or decreases, your salary and clearance level are affected.

I enjoyed what I played of Need to Know, mostly for its interesting premise and potential to tap into morally grey decision-making. » **Elise Favis**

Correctly or incorrectly identifying threats will come with their own consequences

Expeditions: Viking

The brutish world of Vikings

Vikings are far from friendly, and their brutish nature is what makes Expeditions: Viking a compelling experience. This tactical RPG tasks you with assuming the role of chieftain of small Viking clan, where the choices you're faced with and the battles you encounter are far from easy.

You begin by customizing your character's attributes and skills, however you do not choose a class, and it is more dependant on the skills you invest in.

The demo starts with a feast after your father's funeral, who was the previous ruler. Because of his passing, you become the new leader. But not all your followers are loyal, and many disagree with your newfound leadership. One attendee has too much to drink, and he and his comrades pick a fight against you.

Battles in Expedition: Vikings are turn-based, and you can move around the board from one hexagon-shaped tile to the next. Tactical positioning is a must; in order to succeed, you should avoid being flanked and surrounded by enemies. Keeping party members at a distance from foes reduces the chance of "attacks of opportunity," where enemies pounce should you pass right in front of them, even if it's not their turn. Some of your party members have special abilities, such as one that wields a spear and can attack enemies from three tiles away.

You can also attempt to lead threats toward prickly bushes or traps so that they get stuck and lose a turn. Battles are difficult during the beginning of the game, where your party is small.

Choice plays a big part in altering both the story and gameplay, and it makes for some interesting dilemmas. For example, after accepting a one-on-one duel, you have multiple options on how to prepare. You can visit a witch to poison your opponent before the fight, ask a huntress to set traps around the battle area, or visit a blacksmith for better weaponry. Depending on what you choose, the fight can change drastically, and those around you will form new opinions of you. If your party maintains a favorable view of you, they'll be more likely to have your back in other scenarios.

From what I played, I enjoyed engaging with this world and choosing different paths on how to best attempt leadership and popularity with my clan. Aesthetically, Viking leaves a lot to be desired because of its subpar visuals, but the world it paints is one I'm interested in revisiting. » Elise Favis

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Logic Artists

» **Developer**
Logic Artists

» **Release**
2017

Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King

Still fun after all these years

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
January 27

It's hard to believe it's been over a decade since Dragon Quest VIII hit the PS2. The game is often revered as one of the best Dragon Quest games thanks to its fun exploration and charming characters. After Dragon Quest VIII, the series found more fanfare on handheld systems with Dragon Quest IX and remakes of earlier entries to follow. Now we're getting the chance to experience this wonderful journey on the go, along with some enhancements.

For this handheld edition, Square Enix made some changes for easier portable play. First off, there are no random encounters. You can see enemies on the map and engage or avoid them as you wish. You even have an option to speed up battles and save anywhere. Menus are also easier to navigate with a quick-select option to put all the handy systems in one place, such as your alchemy pot, the world map, and fast travel. Previously, you had to dig through menus to do this.

Dragon Quest VIII also comes with some nifty additions. You get two new party members, Red and Morrie, who were previously minor but memorable NPCs. They both bring new attacks and weapons with them. Morrie has claws and an ability that lets him increase the team's tension, supplementing their attack damage. Red attacks with fans and has a mixture of abilities and spells. The abilities range from instant-death attacks to health recovery.

The additions don't stop there. The game also adds two dungeons and new monsters to fight and recruit, such as Crème Caroslime, which looks like the tasty dessert. A photo mode allows you to take shots of your characters, posing them and adding stamps as you see fit. The monster arena has a new "X" rank, with monsters from Dragon Quest Joker. Throw in new recorded dialogue and a brand-new unlockable ending, and returning fans have plenty of fresh content to get excited about. From my hands-on time, the game didn't look like anything was sacrificed to bring it to a smaller screen. In fact, in many ways it looked sharper than I remembered. I'm just glad I won't have to wait long to experience one of my favorite games again. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Jessica casts Frizz!

Mario Sports Superstars

Bringing the team together

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Camelot Software

» **Release**
Spring

Nintendo sports games like Mario Tennis and Mario Golf are traditionally sold as individual titles, with fans needing to buy multiple games to experience all of Mario's athletic outings. With Mario Sports Superstars, Nintendo and developer Camelot Software deliver five sports titles in one package, alleviating that issue.

The five sports on tap are soccer, baseball, tennis, golf, and horse racing. The modes offer single matches as well as tournaments. When you enter a game, you choose a couple of captains from the mainstay roster of characters including Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Bowser before filling your team with peripheral characters like Goombas, Magikoopas, and various costumed Toads.

The sports are easy to pick up and play. Whether I was executing a corner-kick as Wario or striking out batters as Boo, I understood how to play within a few seconds of starting. With it being a Nintendo sports game, arcade elements such as special moves and abilities permeate the experience. This helps the strategic elements of the title by allowing you to assemble a team that matches your desired playstyle.

Having five sports in one single package is nice, but that didn't prevent me from wishing basketball was included in the compilation. While it makes sense that a mode similar to Mario Hoops 3-on-3 isn't included (that game was developed by Square Enix, not Camelot), I would have loved to have seen Camelot's take on that sport.

Though this isn't the first time a compilation title for Nintendo sports games has been attempted, 2011's Mario Sports Mix was criticized for its repetition and lack of content. Hopefully Mario Sports Superstars can provide more longevity when it comes out in 2017. » **Brian Shea**

Fastball

Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World

Expanding on the pattern

Yoshi's Woolly World was a strong Wii U title in 2015, but Nintendo is hoping to give it new life on the more popular 3DS. Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World brings all the charm, adorableness, solid platforming, and item hunting of the original release, but also new content to give players who already completed the adventure incentive to return.

As the updated name indicates, Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World adds new features that make Yoshi's canine companion more prominent. A new mode called Poochy Dash puts you in control of the pup in auto-runner stages where you earn gems and complete special challenges like reaching the end under a certain time. These new levels are fun to play, but as of now, there are only five in the game, which doesn't seem like it will be enough to keep players busy – even with the challenges.

During the main adventure, the mellow mode option not only grants your Yoshi wings but also gives you three Poochy pups that follow you around. These pups act as reusable yarn balls so you never need to worry about running out

of yarn, but they also assist you with finding secrets in the stages.

Another fun addition is that you can now edit your Yoshi skins using the touchscreen of the 3DS. Using the easy editor, I could create cool patterns in seconds, while the professional editor allowed me to simply fabricate more intricate designs modeled after specific characters.

Though the game originally appeared on the more powerful Wii U, it runs at a

smooth 60 frames-per-second on New Nintendo 3DS. If you have the original 3DS, a Nintendo representative tells me the framerate drops to 30.

Unfortunately, one of my favorite features of the Wii U version, the cooperative multiplayer, doesn't make the leap to 3DS. While no multiplayer is disappointing, Yoshi's Woolly World remains a solid platformer that too many people missed out on thanks to its Wii U exclusivity. » **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
February 3

Atelier Firis: The Alchemist And The Mysterious Journey

An alchemist broadening her horizons

The niche Atelier series has had a steady flow of releases thanks to the support of its passionate fanbase. Its next entry is just a few months away, and once again item synthesis and turn-based combat are at the forefront. We spoke to Gust's Yoshito Okamura about we can expect from Atelier Firis, which he says is the largest adventure the team has created

yet. "We'd say it's probably 10 times bigger than previous games," Okamura says. "This means there are a lot more side quests."

The game stars Firis, who is new to alchemy; she's energetic, stubborn, and driven to try new things. With the help of her protective sister, she must pass an alchemy exam within a year. Firis has never left her isolated village, so part

of the game is fulfilling her dreams to explore the world and meet new people. "Firis really wants to go into the outside world, and she discovers alchemy is her way out," Okamura says. "The second part of the game is Firis figuring out what she wants to do." This larger journey has no time limit to complete.

Throughout the game, Firis meets interesting faces, including Sophie and Plachta from the previous game. Okamura also teased even more cameos from characters in the series. In addition, Firis can recruit up to 10 characters to join her in battle and multiple endings are available depending on her relationships. Okamura compares the turn-based battle system to Atelier Shallie with a chain burst, which allows your characters to strike in succession, culminating in a powerful final blow once you fill up a gauge with regular attacks.

The Atelier games have always been charming and had an engaging alchemy loop, making me always want to top my last creation. Atelier Firis' larger scope makes me extra excited. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Vita • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Koei Tecmo

» **Developer**
Gust

» **Release**
Spring

gameinformer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH

82 Dishonored 2

Whether you prefer to stay in the shadows or wield your supernatural powers in broad daylight, Dishonored 2 delivers a satisfying adventure brimming with interesting environmental storytelling, clever navigational puzzles, and ambitious level designs that take this stealth combat series to new heights. This is a must-play for action fans.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	2016.

AWARDS

gameinformer **PLATINUM**	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer **GOLD**	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer **SILVER**	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer **GAME OF THE MONTH**	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Dishonored 2

A shadow walking success

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One •PC

» **Concept**
Shore up the few deficiencies of the original Dishonored and introduce new supernatural powers that further enable player creativity

» **Graphics**
The new Void engine gives the painterly art style a noticeable upgrade, and the vibrant Karnacan locale is a nice change of pace from the industrial confines of Dunwall

» **Sound**
Despite its celebrity cast, the voice acting sounds rushed. Erica Luttrell's performance as Emily Kaldwin is particularly wooden

» **Playability**
Dishonored 2 offers a rewarding experience, whether you choose a stealth or combat-focused approach

» **Entertainment**
Wonderful environmental storytelling and smart level design that invites players to think outside the box combine to overcome the poorly executed narrative

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Revenge is one of the oldest and most pervasive storytelling themes found in literature, film, and theater. Interactive entertainment frequently trades in this convention as well, giving players the tools to pursue justice unbound by the restraints of law and order. Arkane Studios has made the conceit the calling card of its Dishonored series, preserving the quest for vengeance as the sequel's central theme.

Fifteen years after Emily Kaldwin ascends to the throne following the assassination of her mother, Dishonored 2 begins with an unexpected (and abrupt) coup. Depending on the choice you make in this pivotal turn of events in the throne room, either Emily or her father Corvo Attano (the original Dishonored protagonist) must voyage to the southernmost point of the empire to unravel the conspiracy of this successful putsch and exact vengeance.

Dishonored 2 wisely preserves the play style flexibility of its predecessor, but better balances the scales between choosing a blood-soaked, high-chaos approach and a nonviolent, low-chaos solution. Whereas the first game failed to deliver a compelling progression for stealth-minded players, the distinct powers Emily and Corvo wield are equally useful for avoiding detection and taking a pound of flesh from every enemy you encounter. Stealthy players will also appreciate the addition of nonlethal drop takedowns and a small timing window that allows you to choke out enemies after stunning them during combat.

Corvo retains the same supernatural arsenal he had in the first game – allowing him to bend time, sic swarms of rats on enemies, and possess animals for a brief moment – but each skill now upgrades in multiple ways via branching paths using runes you can find hidden throughout the levels. On the other hand, Emily brandishes a suite of brand new abilities, making her the more interesting choice for a first playthrough. The doppelganger and mesmerize powers are useful diversions, and the shadow walk skill makes her much harder to spot when moving through heavily patrolled areas. Each of these has value, but the star power of the game is domino. Once fully upgraded, domino allows you to tie the fates of several enemies together via a psychic bond. Incapacitating or eliminating an entire room of guards in one fell swoop always feels gratifying.

You cannot unlock every upgrade for either character in a single playthrough, which makes the weight of rune-spending decisions heavier and encourages replayability. The addition of bone charm customization and a no-powers mode also give you variables should you choose to play multiple times. The story is largely the same no matter which protagonist you choose, but Emily and Corvo's unique voiceovers give new perspective to unfolding events. Also expect to stumble upon nooks and crannies you may have missed earlier.

Whatever approach you choose, Dishonored 2 rewards situational analysis, patience, and experimentation with the supernatural powers at your disposal. The game shines when you treat each enemy encounter like a puzzle, discerning whether to lure enemies into traps, pit them against one another, or evade them altogether with some deft navigation and sleight of hand. Stumbling upon solutions like turning the mechanical clockwork soldiers against their creator is a true joy of the game.

The excellent level design plays a large role in creating these improvisational opportunities. Dishonored 2 is at its best when it pushes beyond its comfort zone with standout missions like the Clockwork Mansion and Stilton's Manor. Each introduces a room- and time-shifting mechanic, respectively, that increases the navigational challenge and opens up new opportunities for clever takedowns.

The sunny island city of Karnaca feels radically different than the cold and foggy industrial capital of Dunwall, and its locales are much more diverse and many environments bustle with civilian activity. Eavesdropping on passersby gives more color to the experience, and Arkane deftly created several navigational puzzles that must be solved to reach the location of the various runes, bone charms, and lore. The minute-to-minute experience isn't radically different than the first game, but feels honed.

Given the excellent environmental storytelling, the rushed and underdeveloped main story beats surprised me. From the abrupt usurpation of the throne to the final showdown, Dishonored 2 never slows down enough to create meaningful context to the events or banter between the main characters. When another claimant to the throne appears out of nowhere, we are expected to believe the entire Dunwall court just takes her word at face value

and abandons its ruler as thoughtlessly as a dim guard abandons investigating the shadowy figure that just darted past. The narrative isn't bad, but could have been much more impactful with better execution. To get the most out of it, I highly recommend you play the excellent original game and its DLC first.

The ending is largely the same no matter how much blood you spill during the course of your revenge campaign, but the epilogue cutscene that follows has several permutations based on who you killed and spared. In general, the chaos system seems more forgiving than the previous game; killing particularly devious people does not harshly penalize players who otherwise show compassion and restraint. As with the last game, leaving corpses all over the world results in a bigger infestation of the local pest (in this case, swarms of dangerous blood flies), adding an extra layer of difficulty to backtracking for action-oriented players.

The only tonal imbalance relates to looting, which does not factor into the chaos system. The former leaders of the empire can steal from the poor and the rich alike with no consequences. Since coin plays a critical role in upgrading weapons and replenishing supplies, you are essentially encouraged to embrace the life of a burglar.

Dishonored 2 successfully builds on the solid stealth-combat foundation of the original while introducing enough fun new gameplay concepts to feel fresh. Whether you prefer sticking to the shadows or gutting every co-conspirator in the land, the game offers a rewarding experience with attractive upgrade paths. The narrative doesn't match the high bar of the gameplay and world building, but Arkane Studios nonetheless delivers a must-play revenge tale among the best in its class.
» **Matt Bertz**

The Edge

I played through Dishonored 2 on the PlayStation 4 and had a largely stable experience, with only one hard crash. However, other GI editors have reported framerate issues on the Xbox One S, and the PC version is suffering from optimization issues Bethesda hopes to address with a patch.

Watch Dogs 2

A hacker's playground

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Taking on the role of Marcus Holloway, you use techy tricks and gadgets to create some spectacular havoc as you expose corrupt corporations

» **Graphics**
San Francisco is a gorgeous setting filled with vibrant vistas and locales

» **Sound**
A variety of genres play as you drive around the city, from hip-hop to rock. However, some car engines and sound effects such as police yelling while in pursuit can be grating and loud

» **Playability**
Once you get the hang of all the hacking functions, the controls are easy to use and the cover-based shooting handles well but offers little novelty

» **Entertainment**
The open world is filled with oddball pedestrians to spy on, and both main and side missions offer plenty of enjoyment with variety that the previous game lacked

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Set in a world similar to our own, Watch Dogs 2 casts you as a young hacker named Marcus Holloway. He and his DedSec hacker group attempt to expose truths by breaching the security of large corporations and government administrations – all with a powerful smart phone that grants godlike control over San Francisco's citizens and infrastructure. Brimming with opportunities to mess with machines on a large scale, the freedom of Watch Dogs 2's open world is alluring and fun, with some improvements over its predecessor but with missteps in other critical areas.

The original Watch Dogs fell short of presenting the hacker fantasy many envisioned. Hacking abilities had limited results that were more repetitive than engaging, and loose driving mechanics gave the impression that you were skidding on ice. These flaws have been addressed, with hacking put at the forefront of gameplay, and vehicles that handle much smoother on the road.

Watch Dogs 2 gives you plenty of ways to cause compelling havoc. You can control something as large as a crane, or cause an enemy's phone to buzz to create a small disruption. Performing quick hacks with the touch of a button makes hacking easily accessible. You can also be precise, with deeper options including proximity traps and luring enemies towards imploding electrical fuses. Remotely controlling vehicles to spin them out of control is an immensely amusing way to lose

Watch Dogs 2 leaves behind Aiden Pierce for a more optimistic protagonist named Marcus Holloway

pursuers during a car chase. I enjoy how Watch Dogs 2 gives you enough creative fuel to achieve the wackiest hacks, from blocking off entryways with forklifts to altering a foe's data to become the target of a gang. This sense of variety and seeing the immediate repercussions of your hacks makes you feel powerful, giving you the illusion that almost anything is possible.

While Marcus is a step up from the empty personality of Aiden Pierce (the first game's hero), he has problems of his own. Marcus is meant to have a strong sense of justice after being wrongly profiled as a criminal by the smart city and surveillance system, ctOS. However, this contradicts his actions that come across too delinquent and impulsive to be meaningful,

such as scaring a teenage girl to teach her a lesson about online predators. Although the theme of exposing corruption through hacking is timely, its expression through Marcus' actions is never nuanced enough to give much insightful commentary, instead remaining more juvenile in tone.

Your main goal is to gain as many DedSec followers as possible as you expose the dirty secrets of one corporation to the next, but it feels more like a popularity contest than hacktivism. You take on the role of a glorified prankster, though the game seems aware of its own absurdities. While it can get some laughs, tipping the scale in favor of goofiness meant I never sympathized with DedSec's end goal of taking down Blume (the makers of ctOS), or connected with any of the characters, who are presented as whiny millennials angry at the system. Instead of being likeable, they are too obnoxious and petty to be meaningful companions.

Watch Dogs 2 is more concerned about making you laugh than making a statement, but some of its jokes are more cringe-worthy than clever, like one character wearing a digital emoji mask. Its off-the-wall humor is outlandish, such as stealing a talking car from a famous film and flashily riding it across town to make headlines. As the game progresses, it tackles heavier topics, such as being investigated by the FBI and exposing how a social media giant helped rig an election, but Watch Dogs 2 never loses its ridiculous tone. It shines best when it satirizes real-world events, such as a mission that is an obvious spin on the Martin Shkreli controversy or when you infiltrate a Google-like company.

You can hack large machines like forklifts and cranes, but also create smaller distractions such as making someone's phone buzz to distract them

Missions can be tackled as you please, either stealthily or with guns blazing, though the quieter approach is far more enthralling due to its emphasis on hacking. The cover-based shooting works well, though it feels bland in comparison to the hacking mechanics, and offers little in terms of novelty. At one of the many 'hackerspace' HQs, where fellow DedSec members can be found, you can use a 3D printer to build an assortment of standard weapons, such as sniper rifles, assault rifles, and shotguns. Outside of aesthetic skins, you can't modify these guns in any way. This is disappointing considering the amount of customization found elsewhere in the world, including the wide rage of apparel to dress Marcus in, from crocs to a biker vest.

As for melee, Marcus has a nifty string attached to a weighted ball which he aggressively swings at foes or uses the cord to choke them. These are thrilling animations, but they leave you vulnerable in a shootout since they take a few seconds to play out, so melee is most useful when you're out of sight. You can play through the entire game non-lethally with Marcus' stun gun, but you see no repercussions for a lethal versus non-lethal approach, which makes this distinction nearly meaningless. I preferred the more practical lethal approach, but going the non-lethal route adds more of a challenge and makes more narrative sense for Marcus.

Marcus' flying drone and remote-controlled car are by far the best additions to your repertoire. These gadgets can reach higher levels or tighter spots that you can't access by foot. Both are helpful and enticing to use, such

as distracting enemies and fooling them into following the RC car as it shouts profanities at them in a British accent. The RC car has an extendable arm, so you can pick up objects or hack junction boxes without physically being there, and the drone can scope out areas as you prepare your plan of attack. Some missions can be completed using these gadgets alone, and finding the route to success is an entertaining challenge.

Hacking invasions return, which are fun hide-and-seek sequences, where you either attempt to find the hacker stealing your data, or are the perpetrator yourself. The downside is you can't exit out of these invasions once they begin, leaving you with no choice but to play out the match and rendering you unable to start other missions until it's over. You can, however, opt out of several different online modes completely in the settings.

We also played a few solid co-op matches that are exclusive to a handful of side missions. These are substantial and fun, and can be played solo or with a friend. Often you are infiltrating a compound or entering a heavily guarded area, to either find and extract data or destroy something. When playing with a friend, I enjoyed coordinating with my teammate, such as the other player using a drone to get a bird's eye view of the area and directing me where to go.

In comparison to the original's drab setting of Chicago, San Francisco is a major improvement. The city and its surrounding neighborhoods are filled with personality, from downtown's colorful street art to Silicon Valley's tech empires, making this world a joy to explore. San Francisco is teeming with activities, including races with karts,

sailboats, motorbikes, and drones, offering several courses with differing difficulties that are fun to play. Four different kinds of races don't provide much variety, but side missions are more substantial. An emphasis is put on environmental puzzles, from a recurring connective pipe puzzle mini-game that offers just enough challenge to be engaging, such as having to use a drone to maneuver around the closed circuit and change the angle of wires where necessary. I also enjoyed making my mark in graffiti, which you can do by finding your way up to specific high vantage points, and you have to use hacking tools or a keen eye to find your way upward.

As fun as exploration can be, I was disappointed on the technical front. While reviewing the game on PlayStation 4, I encountered significant framerate drops that occurred more than once, which is disrupting during shootouts and jarring if you're behind the wheel. That wasn't the only issue I encountered, either; a game-breaking bug that deleted several apps from Marcus' phone (without any way to retrieve them) left me restarting the game completely. According to Ubisoft, this bug is "extremely rare" and should be patched soon, though it did disrupt my experience.

Watch Dogs 2 addresses many of the issues of the first game, putting hacking at the forefront, but its narrative struggles to stay engaging. Although the cast is unlikeable, the parodies and its ability to not take itself seriously brings charm. The stellar hacking mechanics can make your actions, such as taking control of a satellite in outer space, feel grandiose and unstoppable in entertaining ways.

» **Elise Favis**

Features Offline

At launch, the seamless online features of Watch Dogs 2 – including a new multiplayer mode called Bounty Hunter – were pulled offline temporarily due to lag and crashes (co-op was unaffected). We didn't have a chance to test these features out completely, but they compose a relatively small piece of the whole Watch Dogs 2 experience.

King's Quest – Chapter 5: The Good Knight

Graham's farewell tour

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Wrap up the King's Quest retelling with an emphasis on King Graham's final adventures

» **Graphics**
Familiar places have changed over time, breathing more life into well-trod locations

» **Sound**
This chapter features some of the season's most dramatic moments, and the actors deliver wonderfully

» **Playability**
Puzzles are interesting and well designed, but one seems as though it was created with a vendetta against the color blind

» **Entertainment**
This final chapter is bittersweet, wrapping up King Graham's story while pointing toward something new

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

King Graham has been through a lot. By the time the fifth episode starts, we've seen him avoid certain death from a dragon, claim a throne, and lose (then reunite with) a child – and those are just the highlights. These pivotal events have taken place in flashbacks, with Graham retelling the stories to his granddaughter, Gwendolyn. Along the way, we've witnessed the hero transform from a naïve youth to a middle-aged ruler. In the final chapter of his story, our hero has to reconcile his determination to go on one last adventure with his fading memory and aging body. It's a bittersweet ending to the series that caps it off on a hopeful note.

We knew that King Graham's tale was drawing to a close from the outset. He's largely bedridden when we reunite with the character, and over the course of each chapter his health has waned further. However, his magic mirror has promised one final adventure, and Graham's determined to see it through.

We've traveled throughout Daventry, and the final chapter sticks close to Graham's kingdom. The locations are familiar, but they've transformed over the years. I've grown fond of these places in the hours I've spent with the game, and the return trip was filled with little surprises. Graham has to navigate a tunnel that previously required a lantern; now it's been overhauled with lights as part of a civic-improvement initiative. Old friends also return in various forms, and I was glad to see them again.

Graham's always been one for embellishment, which has been one of the funniest parts of the games. Players who tried doing weird things were often rewarded with Christopher Lloyd's stammering that, now that he thinks about it, that wasn't how it happened. This time, his retelling is unreliable because of his memory loss. A few puzzles center on his inability to keep his facts straight, and even though these inconsistencies are played for laughs, it's sad to see our once-proud hero in this state. Some areas are blanked out, as Graham can't recall the details. And in one panic-stricken moment, he desperately tries to embellish moments from previous chapters so they're more interesting. Gwendolyn does her best to calm Graham down and get him to tell the stories as they actually happen. The two characters have had great chemistry from the beginning, and their interactions are particularly sweet here. A storytelling handoff happens later that ties things together beautifully.

The Odd Gentlemen have done a fine job with its storytelling, though the puzzles and the ways they've been incorporated in the tale have been inconsistent. I thought the previous chapter leaned too heavily on them, and while they're still abundant in the conclusion, they fit well overall. Another fun escape-room style section requires careful observation and exploration. The final section is a puzzle-heavy showdown with the villain that is satisfying and interesting. The only real misstep is a retread of an earlier music-box puzzle that I had to brute force my way through, thanks to poor in-game lighting, my TV's color calibration, or something else.

This marks the last full episode of the King's Quest season, and I'm relieved that it ends on what actually feels like an ending. There have been some great treats for longtime fans throughout the previous chapters, and The Odd Gentlemen rewards that loyalty. Some players might find a couple of moments on the corny side, but without spoiling anything, I was absolutely delighted by it all.

I'm sad that this marks the end of this retelling of King Graham's adventures, but I'm also excited about the seeds that have been planted. Graham and his successors will live on in our imaginations, and I think that's the kind of legacy that he'd want. » **Jeff Cork**

A King's Quest Epilogue

Chapter 5 ends on a satisfying note, but Sierra has an epilogue in the works for those who bought the game's Complete Edition. Sierra isn't sharing details on where the epilogue is set, how long of an experience it offers, or if it even includes playable content. In the meantime, The Good Knight feels like a conclusion.

Will this be the end of the King's Quest reboot? Hopefully not

Tyranny

Unabashed evil

Style 1–Player Role–Playing **Publisher** Paradox Interactive **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment **Release** November 10 **Rating** NR

8.25

PC

Obsidian's latest role-playing epic is true to its name. Tyranny is concerned with the nature of power, and the ways in which the concentration of that power invariably leads to oppression. Obsidian pulls no punches in its depiction of a world overthrown by evil, and players shouldn't have any illusions that the protagonist is somehow a remedy to this world's dilemmas. This is a bleak and hopeless story, but one told with imagination, vibrant world-building, and dramatic choices that fundamentally alter the narrative as it unfolds.

You are an enforcer and arbiter of the Overlord, whose armies seek to overwhelm and crush the last vestiges of resistance in a world that has already suffered hundreds of years of brutal rule. An opening campaign of harsh binary choices describes the first few years of the conquest, and it's thrilling to see the ways seemingly minor choices in the introductory minutes dramatically shake up the rest of the story. For example, one soldier might recall the harsh judgment you refused her countrymen years earlier, and deny you crucial passage into a fort. Once you get into the meat of the tale, Tyranny is filled with fascinating characters shaped by the realities of their situation. In particular, the other leaders of the Overlord's armies are brilliantly conceived – warped creatures of malice

and cunning that act as great conversational foils to your ongoing adventure.

Tyranny offers copious tracts of text that provide a breadth of options and outcomes, but the decisions eliminate stereotypically good or merciful selections. You are sometimes left only grim alternatives, such as murdering helpless prisoners in cold blood, or abandoning them to torture and degradation. The party members who join you are likewise reprehensible, valuing slaughter and control as virtues, or at best turning a blind eye to suffering. Engendering an affinity or affection for them when most are so unsympathetic is hard, and you get little in the way of meaningful relationship evolution over time. While the focus on malevolent characters and decisions is certainly novel within the genre, it can lead to an absence of investment in narrative outcomes. If I'm not given an option to choose a good path, is it really that impactful to adopt a darker persona?

Obsidian's love for the isometric RPG is once again apparent, and while the systems differ, players of last year's Pillars of Eternity will feel right at home with the core mechanics. Excellent pause-and-play combat is tactical and challenging, and grows more so through the variety of consumables, spells, and combo abilities; only occasional A.I. and pathing issues

marred my impression. A highly flexible spell-crafting system is a particular highlight, and makes magic-focused characters more interesting than their martial counterparts. Character customization is deep and complex, with multiple possible roles available to any party member, made all the more nuanced once high-powered weapons and armor begin to introduce their own powers and abilities to their wielders.

Tyranny's setting sells the idea of a ruined land and battered populace. Each of several distinct areas bears the mark of the Overlord's overwhelming magical might, often through catastrophic spells called edicts. Whether it's a ceaseless storm that shatters a whole countryside, or a blistering volcano that consumes a rebellious enclave of scholars, each location feels distinct and memorable. You eventually control massive towers scattered amid the devastation, providing an intriguing twist on the idea of stronghold advancement. By mastering the magically connected Spires, players can build their own forge, infirmary, and more to help rally followers. I only wish the full spectrum of these stronghold options opened earlier in the game; just as I got a handle on my crafting abilities, the game was wrapping up.

Even within the limited constraint of mostly dark outcomes, Tyranny has an impressive array of potentialities to explore, and practically demands multiple playthroughs. Entirely new storylines, allies, and even visited areas might appear in a subsequent adventure, and it's exciting to confront a new mix of betrayals and dangers. As evidenced by a gripping final act that cries out for a sequel, Tyranny puts enormous authority in the hands of its players to shape the destiny of an entire world, but also leaves those players with an unrepentantly sober warning about corruption and power.
» Matt Miller

» Concept
Recall the epic isometric RPGs of the '90s, but excise any notion of heroism or nobility

» Graphics
Obsidian's environment art sells the idea of a fallen world wracked by overwhelming barbarism and villainy

» Sound
The voice acting often accentuates the repugnance of the main and secondary characters, and occasionally adds nuance

» Playability
The deep customization, upgrade, and combat options are a joy to master. Multiple difficulty settings are welcoming to any player

» Entertainment
A rich fantasy characterized by deeply troubling themes, imagery, dialogue, and actions

» Replay Value
High

7.5

Rift • Vive • PC

» **Concept**
Deliver swift vengeance to the enemies of the Emperor in a '90s-style space shooter

» **Graphics**
Clean, crisp, and functional, but stylistically harkening back to another era of space simulation

» **Sound**
Constant radio chatter, powerful thrusters, and heavy space guns chugging in space sell the simulation

» **Playability**
Controls could be challenging for those picking up a space shooter for the first time, and the difficulty picks up quickly

» **Entertainment**
Smart design conjures up nostalgia for an older generation of space shooters as a bite-size snack that may leave you hungry for a more substantial meal

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

House Of The Dying Sun

Short, sweet, and somewhat sentimental

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Marauder Interactive **Developer** Marauder Interactive **Release** November 1 **Rating** NR

While the space-flight simulation genre continues to find support and solace in what promises to be a new era of multi-faceted offerings with games like Elite: Dangerous and Star Citizen, sometimes you just want that feeling of dogfighting in your local arcade cockpit with a slice of pizza dripping onto your shirt as you blast an enemy starfighter to smithereens, watching the pixels burst. House of the Dying Sun taps into a lost era of starfighting simulation, successfully evoking the feeling of a classic space shooter like X-Wing, TIE Fighter, or Starlancer. If you're looking for a story, forget it; it's as cliché and barebones as they come. If you're looking for tight gameplay, great music, and intense dogfighting, you've come to the right place.

A minimalistic story could be a serious detriment to other games, but the focus is clear here: Gameplay and space combat take center stage. Arcade-style movement with the ability to drift and brake on a dime after boosting to dodge a locked-on enemy combatant is satisfying, and you don't need a HOTAS setup to enjoy it either – the core mouse and keyboard controls work great.

With an upgradable arsenal of auto-cannons, heavy weapons, and sleek maneuvering around asteroids and other craft, you unleash hell on the enemies of the Emperor. The concept is simple and so are the missions, tasking the player to destroy enemy ships, defend allied assets, or run escort duty. Dogfighting in your craft with enemy fighters zipping around asteroids is intense fun, and missions are a quick

restart if you run into an errant piece of space debris. The constant pace of combat is immersive and exciting, with the threat of enemy reinforcements always moments away, forcing you to complete your task and warp away before more difficult opponents join the fray.

It takes a a few mid-tier missions to really get the hang of ship control, assigning your other pilots tasks while shooting around the sky, and hopping into your allied vessels when your first option is turned into scrap, but the challenge summons a nostalgic feeling I enjoyed, though there's little variety in mission structure or tasks.

I completed the core game and missions in a few hours, but many additional unlocks and challenges can keep the journey through space rolling for those seriously looking for more. Short length is not necessarily a negative point to a game, but it's a noticeable detriment here, offering a tiny taste of what a full-fledged title could be within the same framework and strong mechanics.

Within the brief campaign, content offerings are sparse and consist mainly of tougher difficulty encounters or a challenge mode – simple, barebones stuff with graphics that don't really live up to today's standards. While the visuals are functional and crisp, they don't need to be as blast-from-the-past as the rest of the title.

House of the Dying Sun is light on content offerings and depth, but big on giving players a modern day chance to experience the great gameplay that defined classic space shooters of an era long past. » **Daniel Tack**

Challenges offer special upgrades for those who are looking for a more difficult experience

Dogfighting In VR

House of the Dying Sun's lightweight graphics and laser-focus on crisp combat lend themselves admirably to a VR experience. If you have either a Rift or Vive, those should be your first choice for hopping into the pilot's seat.

Owlboy

Taking the high road

9

PC

Owlboy brims with an unbridled earnestness I can't help but root for. Its characters are unflinching optimists, always looking for silver linings and the next course of action, even in the face of tragedy. The line between good and evil is crystal clear, being selfish or mean is looked down upon, and the story's tone tends to match that of a great children's film. It also happens to be one of the most well-paced, clever, and fun games of the year.

Owlboy takes the freedom of movement of a side-scrolling shooter and blends it with the pacing and design sensibilities of a game like Zelda or Metroid, where you travel around a number of zones and solve puzzles. As Otus, an anthropomorphic owl, you're free to fly in any direction for as long as you want. Moving around the world feels natural. On the ground, the game feels like a platformer; in the air, you maneuver around enemies and shoot them like you would in a dual-joystick shooter.

Instead of holding his own weapons, Otus enlists one of three friends who each fire a different type of gun. Geddy uses a pistol that lets you pick off enemies at a distance. Alphonse, who you meet later, uses a powerful musket that takes a long time to reload and has a short range. In hectic fights, I frequently start with Alphonse as my opening salvo, then switch to Geddy while keeping an eye on the reload timer, which gives every fight a fluid, cyclical pace. I won't spoil the third friend, but they grant you even more mobility at the cost of firepower.

Making every gun its own character works brilliantly, since it reinforces Owlboy's strong characters. Geddy, Alphonse, and Otus establish a good group dynamic through snappy dialogue that gives everyone a distinct personality. I came to like almost everyone in the supporting cast, who are all brought to life with incredibly detailed animations. Though Otus is silent, he says what he needs to with his facial and body language. When he's surprised, his eyes bulge in a cartoonish fashion, and when he approaches a cemetery, he demures, treading slowly in respect.

A few sections limit your ability to fly, but most levels embrace your power of flight, and working through them feels refreshing as a result. During my first couple of hours, I had to remember that if I couldn't find the missing piece or trick to solve a puzzle, I could just

fly up to platforms that seemed out of reach. Whenever I got stuck later on, it was because I hadn't thought of a particular use for a tool I already had, like the ability to hide from enemies behind boxes or grappling objects from afar (a skill you acquire later on). Some of the puzzles go by too quickly, but most are involved enough to make you scratch your head.

Every boss is a highlight, forcing you to maneuver deftly or use every tool at your disposal in clever ways. In many of them, the dynamic of avoiding projectiles while waiting for a tell mixes well with the Metroid-esque tendency to use the newest weapon at your disposal. Not all of the fights work this way; one boss, a giant worm, adheres more closely to the "avoid bullets and shoot the weakpoint" school of boss design, but it's still a fun fight.

In the 10 hours it took me to get through Owlboy, I never felt like I was going through the motions, and I only once felt like I'd rather skip a part of the game, during a later stealth section aboard a pirate ship where the checkpoints were too spread out. But otherwise, I was constantly facing new situations. A few stealth sections slow the pace down, but they're (mostly) not too frustrating. A few bombastic set-piece moments, like skimming from rock to rock to avoid a pirate ship's cannon, punctuate these segments as well.

I constantly wanted to see what Owlboy would show me next, but I lingered on a few side activities, too. Rings and coins are scattered all throughout the world, and collecting them lets you upgrade your weapons and wear silly hats once you've collected enough coins. You can also seek out a couple of more well-hidden secrets. Seeking out coins is worthwhile, since the weapon upgrades are more powerful, and one side quest offers a bit more backstory.

While the characters and world of Owlboy made me want to keep going, the plot falls a bit short. Early on, the game sets up an interesting dynamic between Otus and his stern mentor, Asio, who scolds Otus frequently. The plot hints at why he's so harsh with you, but the full reveal never comes. The relationship is thrown by the wayside for most of the game, and the unsatisfying ending doesn't tie up the loose thread. Instead, it introduces a convoluted plot point in the last hour, then never fully explains that, either.

Owlboy not only has the hook of a new idea to mix up the genres it mettles in, but the fundamentals to follow up on it. Its sense of movement is fluid, its momentum is strong, and its characters are engrossing. The tone might be saccharine at times, but when so many other games go for either oppressive grittiness or eye-rolling irreverence, I'm willing to accept that. » **Suriel Vazquez**

8.5

» Concept
Capture Pokémon in a world inspired by Hawaii, while re-imagining a few of Pokémon's core mechanics

» Graphics
The best-looking Pokémon game to date. Character animation has been improved significantly and the world feels truly 3D, unlike the last two games which felt like the 2D Pokémon games, but with added aesthetic depth

» Sound
Familiar sound effects and Pokémon themes appear, but many of them feel different and sound great thanks to the infusion of ukulele

» Playability
Grid-based movement is dead, thank Arceus. Your trainer finally moves as a character should in a 3D environment. Much of the menu clutter has been cleaned up for a less complicated interface

» Entertainment
You're still collecting monsters by throwing Poké Balls and taking on the competition in turn-based battles, but Sun & Moon feels like a brand new Pokémon game in some fundamental and worthwhile ways

» Replay Value
High

Pokémon Sun & Moon

Destination vacation

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** The Pokémon Company/Nintendo
Developer Game Freak **Release** November 18 **Rating** E

Pokémon is a series that nailed its mechanics on the first try. It was a massive success, and follow-up entries have mostly stayed the course: Capture monsters, collect badges, and share your collection with friends. Sun & Moon is not a radical reinvention of Pokémon, but it does re-examine some ingrained mechanics and the result is a better, more diverse Pokémon experience that feels different from past games, even if it does have a familiar core.

The first thing I noticed is human character models and their animations have been dramatically improved. The Pokémon feel mostly unchanged, but the way your character and other NPCs move is significantly better. Grid movement is finally dead, and I couldn't be happier. Animation improvements even help in storytelling. The narrative delivers familiar messages of kinship and working with your Pokémon friends, but it does hide a few surprises, as well as mysteries extending beyond the credits that are worth exploring.

Walking around in Alola feels better, and its layout is much friendlier. Tall grass is still unavoidable in some instances, but you can often take a path around it if you need to avoid combat. Alola's islands are more open, and while it is in your best interest to explore the grass, fight, and collect, I was happy to discover the safe routes when I was just trying to go from point A to B. Even the trainers who can't help but stop you in the road to battle offer more signs they're prepared to pounce. You won't make much progress if you avoid them all, but I like having a way out.

Mechanically, fighting is mostly unchanged. Z-Moves are the big twist this time around, replacing the Mega Evolutions of recent entries. Z-Moves act like a guaranteed critical hit, and each is accompanied by a dance. Maybe performing a dance to pull off an ultra move sounds dumb, but the excellent animation makes the dances fun to watch. The Pokémon-specific Z-Moves are also entertaining, as it

gets your pocket monster involved in the often-absurd display. They function as a give-it-all-you-got attack to finish off a powerful foe, give yourself a strong lead, or to get you out of a tough situation. Using it is always an important decision, because you only get one per fight. So, it's a fun tactical play against the right enemy at the right time.

The rock-paper-scissors nature of fighting is still here, but now menus remember what attacks work best against which enemies for you. I've always struggled remembering the breakdown of strengths and weaknesses when it comes to Pokémon types, especially as new ones have been added over the years, so this reminder was invaluable to me. In the past, I would keep a document nearby listing all of the types' strengths and weaknesses, and I am happy to leave it behind. Anything that keeps me playing the game and not putting it down to do research is a good thing.

Battling and collecting Pokémon feels the same, but finding Gym Badges is different. You complete Trials instead of taking on Gyms, and that's more than just a change in terminology. Combat is still crucial to completing each Trial, but additional tasks make them all unpredictable. One has you listening to sound cues and identifying what they represent, while another tasks you with collecting ingredients to summon a powerful Totem Pokémon. I didn't know what to expect going into each of these trials, and as a player who has collected his fair share of Gym Badges throughout his life, I enjoyed not knowing what was next. The non-combat parts of these Trials are never hard and are usually played for laughs. The nature of the Trials also gives what would have been forgettable gym leaders in the past an opportunity to show some character and be more memorable. The Trial structure made me eager to go after each one, especially since they all award new Z-Moves (instead of just an icon attached to your save file).

HMs (hidden machines), which allow you to do things like learn to fly for fast travel, or break rocks for expanded exploration, are gone for Sun & Moon. Instead, you have a device that lets you call in Pokémon you can mount. You can ride Taurus, for example, to travel faster and break through rocks. I prefer this over the HM system, since it means you no longer have to sacrifice one of your Pokémon's attack slots in order to perform special environmental moves. Plus, seeing your trainer ride around on assorted Pokémon as you control them is fun, and sometimes very dumb.

Your Pokédex offers more visual reward for collecting Pokémon, though the act of catching the creatures is unchanged. You can tell immediately if a Pokémon has an evolution when you catch it, and when you collect a full set, the background color of that Pokémon's entry changes. It's a small flair, but it makes filling out your Pokédex enticing, and it is easier to see what entries are missing.

Much of the clutter from the previous games has been removed for a U.I. with fewer distractions and mini-games. Pokémon-Amie has been renamed to Pokémon Refresh, and while it continues to serve the same ignorable functions of the previous games like petting and feeding your team, it now also allows you to remove status ailments between fights. You can still go the standard route of using items to cure things like poison and paralysis, but I like having a "free" option that gives you a close-up look at the Pokémon models.

Poké Pelago can be accessed any time, and lets you periodically do something with the Pokémon living in your PC. The rewards are small, but I like even the idea that my Pokémon

are not just languishing away in my PC. Festival Plaza is a physical place where you and your friends can socialize, trade, and battle. It does a good job limiting the menu-heavy interaction typically associated with playing Pokémon with friends. Sun & Moon's Photo Mode is fairly shallow and is not the return of Pokémon Snap some hoped it would be. As an additional distraction to explore in Alola, however, it's a welcome bonus. Strangely, it also represents the only element of the game in stereoscopic 3D. I did not

miss stereoscopic 3D in the rest of the game, but I admit surprise at its near total absence.

Sun & Moon feels significantly different from previous Pokémon games. X & Y may have marked the series' biggest visual change, but Sun & Moon shows Game Freak is willing to re-examine Pokémon's tenured mechanics in order to improve the game. Sun & Moon is still Pokémon, but it showcases some of the biggest changes the series has ever seen – and that's a good thing.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

The Difference Between Sun And Moon
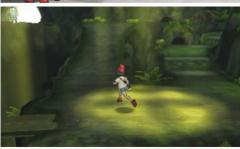
The differences between Pokémon versions are generally small and relate to which Pokémon are more prevalent in which versions. That continues to be the case here, as some Pokémon only appear in one version, or appear more frequently in one version over another. Beyond the monsters, the Sun and Moon versions are different in another way: The day/night cycle. If you're playing Sun, the in-game time of day corresponds to the real-life time of day. In Moon, the times are reversed; when you play during the day, it is night in the game. The difference is mostly an aesthetic one, and thankfully never impedes your plot progress.

7 | Dragon Ball Xenoverse 2

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 25 **Rating** T

You make your way through the story, which you have played in some form or another in every Dragon Ball Z game. You do the same fights, which feel especially similar to the previous game since the combat system has not evolved. — *Kyle Hilliard*

6.5 | Mario Party Star Rush

Platform 3DS **Release** November 4 **Rating** E

Mario Party Star Rush feels more like a collection of modes than a fun next step for the series. The simultaneous gameplay left me feeling less invested in the actions of my opponents, minimizing the desire to be strategic, while the minigames were more hit-or-miss than ever before. — *Brian Shea*

6.75 | Shadow Warrior 2

Platform PC **Release** October 13 **Rating** M

Once I completed Shadow Warrior 2, I sat watching the credits and feeling a strange sensation of relief and disappointment at having finished yet another first-person shooter that trades a sharp focus for hours upon hours of grinding to earn unrewarding content. — *Javy Gwaltney*

5 | Robinson: The Journey

Platform PSVR **Release** November 8 **Rating** E

The premise invites a variety of interesting gameplay possibilities, but your imagination is more compelling than anything Robinson: The Journey actually provides. Instead, it ineptly shuffles you through a series of brief-but-frustrating areas, stumbles with its VR interface, and fails to give you fun ways to interact with your surroundings. — *Joe Juba*

6.75 | Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 25 **Rating** T

The abrupt endings, forced action sequences, and extensive load times mar an otherwise fun adventure game. The topnotch writing, and fascinating hook of Holmes struggling with a real issue are buried beneath these problems. — *Andrew Reiner*

5.5 | Infinite Air

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 25 **Rating** T

Infinite Air piggybacks on the world-building of The Golf Club, but unlike that title, Infinite Air's gameplay core isn't strong enough to anchor the trappings around it. Populating a mountain with rails and jumps, and creating competitions for others as they have for you, is a tantalizing playground, but one that can't rise above the surrounding mediocrity. — *Matthew Kato*

The Story Behind the Most Star-Studded Game You've Never Heard Of

Would you believe Robert De Niro, Cher, Aerosmith, James Belushi, and Christopher Reeve all worked together on a game called 9: The Last Resort? Given the immense star power behind this project, it should have been well known, but it never made it into the spotlight, and quickly faded into obscurity. We tracked down the director of this game, and he told us how this unlikely collaboration came to be.

by Andrew Reiner

In the early 1990s, George Lucas wasn't just known as the creator of Star Wars, he was making a name for himself in technology as well. Lucasfilm helped lead the charge in computer-generated imagery and enhanced audio for films. Subsidiary THX handled the audio, and it became a new standard for movie theaters, video games, and home screening rooms. THX's head of research and development, Buzz Hays, had a hand in deploying that technology around the world, and even worked closely with actor Robert De Niro and film producer Jane Rosenthal to build the Tribeca Film Center in New York.
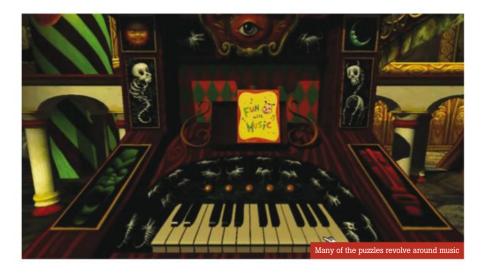
Hays stayed friends with them, and received a peculiar phone call from them years later, when he was a producer on the indie film *Swimming with Sharks*. "Rosenthal asked me if I knew anybody who could run an interactive company for them," Hays recalls. "I offered to help introduce them to people in Silicon Valley, because I was living in San Francisco at the time."

A few weeks went by, and Hays, who was feverishly trying to find a company to distribute his film, received another call from Rosenthal. This time the tone was more urgent. "'Look, we've been trying like crazy to find somebody to run this company,'" he recalls her saying. "'We can't find anyone. Everybody just wants to pitch us their game ideas for Furbies. Would you be interested in running this thing with us?'"

Hays didn't hesitate in accepting the position, and soon became the co-founder of Tribeca

Many of the puzzles revolve around music

Interactive. The only stipulation he had in his agreement was that the company needed to be based in San Francisco. He argued that most of the people making games were in the Bay Area, but he didn't need to convince De Niro, since his father lived in the area and he was frequently visiting anyway.

With two Hollywood titans at the helm, one would think the office would be divine, but it was actually located in an RV park in what Hays describes as a "funky loft space down a rather funky alley." The loft space no longer exists, and was in the vicinity of where AT&T Park sits today. The remote location was intentional; the company didn't want attention because of the movie stars behind it. "We just wanted to lay low," Hays says.

The company staffed up quickly, plucking key artists and programmers from the Bay Area, including some from Industrial Light and Magic. Although De Niro and Rosenthal were taking pitches for games as they tried to find someone to run the company, they already had a game in mind, and even hired David Greene to create a treatment for it. "It was a rock 'n' roll based thing," Hays remembers. "There were elements that made sense, but others that wouldn't fit into the context of what we were trying to do with it."

Hays took on the role of director of the still un-named project, and helped bring in a key piece of the development team, a renowned painter named Mark Ryden. Dubbed the godfather of pop surrealism, Ryden became a pop icon for his album covers, notably Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" and Aerosmith's "Love in an Elevator," along with *Rolling Stone* magazine covers. With Ryden onboard, Hays remembers the excitement for the project and the need to finalize a vision quickly. "We decided to hole up in a rental house in New Hampshire during the middle of winter just to knock out ideas for three or four days," Hays says.

Given the peculiarity of the work environment, the team would take breaks to play video games. The house had the seasonal flare you would expect – fireplaces and bay windows – but also a giant bar filled with arcade games. The team drew inspiration from the games, and then would retreat to the fire to knock around ideas. Once a general semblance of a script was concocted, some characters came to life, as did a general game design.

Ryden uses a lot of numerology and symbology in his artwork, and liked the idea of the game just being called "9," as a way of calling out the nine "muses" players meet along their journey. It also made sense, since only nine people were working on the project. In certain regions of the world, the title was altered to 9: The Last Resort.

The team settled on making a graphically intensive PC adventure game filled with quick-time video, spoken dialogue, and puzzles based on musical instruments. Movement was handled like Myst, with the player viewing pre-rendered environments from the first-person perspective and clicking directions to view it from different angles or move.

The player begins as the inheritor of a hotel called The Last Resort, which has recently become the home of nine muses, as well as two evil squatters named the Toxic Twins. The goal of the game is to help the muses build a "Muse Machine," the only thing that can banish the Twins from the hotel.

When Hays and his team returned to California, De Niro reached out to some of his actor friends to see if they would be interested in providing voice work. As development of the game began in earnest, the voice cast ballooned with talent, and included Cher as Isadora the fortune-teller, Christopher Reeve as Thurston

Last (the original owner of the hotel), James Belushi as Salty, and Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry as the Twins. The final script was written by Tom Minton, one of the creators of *Animaniacs*, who was brought in for his humor and ability to meld music into his writing.

Despite none of the talent knowing much about the game industry, Hays says they had a great time making the game. "They were just in it for the right reasons, and it was fun," he says. "One of the things that cracked me up the most is when we did the recording studio sessions with Steven Tyler and Joe Perry. We went to Gloria Estefan's studio to record their voices, and we had to delay one of the sessions because we were out of fat-free muffins – which is exactly the image you have of rockstars in the recording studio. Other than Steven and Joe, none of them were ever in the same room at the same time. So it was all kind of recorded in isolation. It was a fun project."

Development of 9: The Last Resort took nearly two years, and the team thought they had something special on their hands – a more irreverent version of Myst, as Hays describes it. The game launched in 1996 and was published by GT Interactive, but didn't make much of a splash. It quickly and quietly vanished from store shelves, but remains one of the strangest and most star-powered games to date.

"It was a different time and a different place," Hays recalls. "Movie studios really wanted to be in that business, which is how Tribeca ended up in it. Now we realize that it was not a good business for a film company like Tribeca…we did the one game and then just decided, 'You know what, it was fun, but this isn't really what we should be doing.'"

Hays followed suit and left the game industry after directing just one game, and is now working on his own movie businesses. He stays in touch with some of the development team, and hopes someday to bring the game back from the dead. He still has all of the assets and game maps, and has even floated the idea of turning 9 into an animated series.

"As we like to say, it was a critical success and a box office failure," Hays says with a laugh. "It was well worth all of the energy we put into it." ◈

A look at James Belushi's character

WHO WOULD WIN...

Gamers love debating hypothetical showdowns, but there are more ways to settle the score than a fight to the death. We devised a series of challenges tailored to the strengths of some of our favorite characters, then consulted a panel of top experts to scientifically determine each victor. Find out who would come out on top in our ultimate quiz: Who Would Win… *by Jeff Marchiafava*

1

AN ARM-WRESTLING CONTEST

Brick vs. Donkey Kong

2

A FOOT RACE

Sonic the Hedgehog vs. Tracer

3

1-ON-1 STREET BASKETBALL

Master Chief vs. Kratos

4

A SPELLING BEE

Marcus Fenix vs. Thrall

5

A DEBATE ON FOREIGN POLICY

General RAAM vs. Urdnot Wrex

6

A PISTOL DUEL AT HIGH NOON

Jesse McCree vs. John Marston

7

WESTMINSTER KENNEL CLUB'S BEST IN SHOW AWARD

Amaterasu vs. D-Dog

8

A GAME OF GLOBAL THERMONUCLEAR WAR

SHODAN vs. GLaDOS

9

DOUBLES TENNIS

Toejam & Earl vs. Boy & his Blob

Answers: 1. Donkey Kong 2. Tracer 3. Kratos 4. Thrall 5. Urdnot Wrex 6. John Marston 7. D-Dog 8. GLaDOS 9. Toejam & Earl

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